

# Diagnosing the Boko Haram Conflict:

## Grievances, Motivations, and Institutional Resilience in Northeast Nigeria

Patricio Asfura-Heim and Julia McQuaid

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| <b>14. ABSTRACT</b><br>The intent of this report is to provide the appropriate type of information—at the appropriate level of granularity—in order to inform U.S. government efforts to develop more effective approaches to countering Boko Haram. The goal is to help U.S. planners and decision-makers understand the conflict as an interconnected system and, eventually, to develop targeted, conflict-sensitive strategies for assisting the Nigerian government. Specifically, this report seeks to diagnose and dissect the conflict by identifying relevant political, economic, social, and security factors at work in northeast Nigeria, by analyzing how key actors mobilize grievances and institutional resiliencies to drive or mitigate conflict, and by forecasting how conflict dynamics might evolve in the future. |                         |                          |                                                                  |                                   |                                                                            |                                                                            |
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# Abstract

The intent of this report is to provide the appropriate type of information—at the appropriate level of granularity—in order to inform U.S. government efforts to develop more effective approaches to countering Boko Haram. The goal is to help U.S. planners and decision-makers understand the conflict as an interconnected system and, eventually, to develop targeted, conflict-sensitive strategies for assisting the Nigerian government. Specifically, this report seeks to diagnose and dissect the conflict by identifying relevant political, economic, social, and security factors at work in northeast Nigeria, by analyzing how key actors mobilize grievances and institutional resiliencies to drive or mitigate conflict, and by forecasting how conflict dynamics might evolve in the future.

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## Executive Summary

Since 2002, the militant group Boko Haram has embarked on a violent insurgent campaign in northeastern Nigeria. The group's goal is to expel the prevailing political establishment, remove all Western influences, and eventually overthrow the national government and establish an Islamic state in its place. Since 2010, this group has been responsible for more terrorist attacks in Nigeria than all other militant groups combined. In April 2014, the conflict rose to prominence on the international stage after Boko Haram kidnapped 270 schoolgirls from the northern town of Chibok. In the aftermath of the kidnappings, the Government of Nigeria requested assistance from international partners, including the United States, to save the girls. As of the writing of this report, most of the girls are still in captivity.

The United States seeks an end to the Boko Haram conflict for numerous reasons. The U.S. has long viewed Nigeria as a strategically important country whose stability and influence are key factors in U.S. policy and interests in Africa. Nigeria is Africa's largest economy, its largest producer of oil, and its most populous country. Furthermore, its government is a leading actor in regional politics and an important contributor to peacekeeping operations in Africa. The United States, which designated Boko Haram a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in November 2013, also has concerns that the group could target its diplomatic and economic interests in Nigeria, and beyond, based on revelations of Boko Haram's suspected links to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and more recently to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). U.S. Africa Command officials have suggested that Boko Haram has elements that aspire to a broader level of attacks—not just in Africa, but also in Europe and potentially in the United States.

The conflict in northeast Nigeria is complex. It is driven by a mix of historical, political, economic, and ethnic antagonisms. Resolving it will require a deep understanding of conflict dynamics, as well as the motivations and capabilities of various key actors. To date, few such comprehensive analyses of the Boko Haram conflict have been attempted. As a result, there is still some debate as to exactly what kind of conflict—insurgency, inter-ethnic warfare, opportunistic criminality, or revolutionary terrorism—is actually taking place in northeast Nigeria. In order to develop an effective response to the threat posed by Boko Haram, the Nigerian government and its international partners must properly diagnose the conflict and comprehend it as an evolving system that can be affected through targeted interventions.

The intent of this report is to provide the appropriate type of information—at the appropriate level of granularity—in order to inform U.S. government efforts to develop more effective approaches to countering Boko Haram. The goal is to help U.S. planners and decision-makers understand the conflict as an interconnected system and, eventually, to develop targeted, conflict-sensitive strategies for assisting

the Nigerian government. **Specifically, this report seeks to diagnose and dissect the conflict by identifying relevant political, economic, social, and security factors at work in northeast Nigeria, by analyzing how key actors mobilize grievances and institutional resiliencies to drive or mitigate conflict, and by forecasting how conflict dynamics might evolve in the future.**

To achieve this, we conducted a conflict assessment, which is an analytical process undertaken to identify and understand the dynamics of violence and instability, and to develop an independent, objective view of a conflict. Conflict assessments uncover the crucial elements of armed conflicts and identify how they interact, in order to assist U.S. government planners in the development of programs that can most effectively support host nation efforts to manage conflicts. Conflict assessments also help ensure that assistance programs are more “conflict sensitive”—that is, to make sure their impact is the intended one.

## Summary of findings

At the completion of our conflict assessment, we reached the following conclusions:

- **The conflict in Nigeria’s northeast is driven by grievances resulting from decades of poor governance, elite delinquency, and extreme economic inequality.** The emergence of Boko Haram is a symptom of the maturation of historical extremist and rejectionist impulses in the northeast and the failure of both governmental and customary conflict mitigation institutions.
- **Since 2009, Boko Haram has transformed itself from a cult-like religious movement into a revolutionary insurgent organization.** Its stated goal is to overthrow the secular government of Nigeria and replace it with an Islamic system. Boko Haram follows a purely military insurgency model and currently has no political front. Until 2014, it held no territory in the classic sense (it can deny territory to the government, but does not administer towns or cities via shadow governance) and has only recently attempted to establish order by imposing sharia law on the towns and villages it has captured.
- **Boko Haram is a regional insurgent group (composed largely of ethnic Kanuri members) with predominantly local aims.** While it borrows tactics from transnational terrorist organizations and receives small amounts of training and funding from foreign jihadists, the group is most accurately viewed as a counterinsurgency problem rather than a pure counterterrorism problem.
- **The group uses guerilla tactics in the northeast and terrorism in the south in the hopes of fomenting instability and to showcase the government’s powerlessness and inability to protect the population.** It targets both government institutions and civilians of all religious backgrounds. Its brazen

attacks have proven extraordinarily effective in producing a sense of chaos in the northeast and beyond, and have created a crisis of legitimacy for the Nigerian government.

- **The conflict is being sustained by masses of unemployed youth who are susceptible to Boko Haram recruitment, an alienated and frightened northern population that refuses to cooperate with state security forces, and a governance vacuum that has allowed the emergence of militant sanctuaries in the northeast.** The Nigerian government has also not worked effectively with governments in neighboring countries to secure shared borders. As a result, the group has been able to cross at will into Kanuri-dominated sanctuaries in Chad, Niger, and Cameroon in order to regroup, train, and recruit new members.
- **In its current form, Boko Haram is not a popular movement and has very little internal or external support outside of the Kanuri ethnic group.** It sustains itself through criminality, extortion, and limited local and foreign donations. It uses financial incentives, ethnic solidarities, and coercion to recruit young men.
- **Boko Haram enjoys substantial freedom of movement in the rural border areas of the northeast.** By cowering the population through “enforcement terror,” it has been able to operate largely unfettered. By contrast, the stand-up of civilian local defense groups has inhibited its movement in urban areas, such as Maiduguri.
- **Boko Haram has systematically targeted the northern political establishment and traditional leaders who could serve as government allies in combating the group.** Local leaders who have spoken out against Boko Haram have been subject to a ruthless murder and intimidation campaign.
- **Once-respected traditional leaders who could lead conflict mitigation efforts have lost influence due to their perceived involvement in partisan politics.** Established Muslim leaders remain divided. As a result, local leaders have not been able to promote a unified counter-narrative to Boko Haram’s extremist ideology.
- **The conflict is also being perpetuated by the Nigerian government, which has employed a heavy-handed, overwhelmingly kinetic approach to dealing with the group and has paid little attention to the underlying contextual realities and root causes of the conflict.** Because the government has no coherent strategy and its security forces are unable to conduct surgical strikes against the insurgents, the government’s operations often result in indiscriminate killings of insurgents and civilians.
- **There is increasing concern about the future of Nigeria’s political stability as the conflict continues.** The inability of the military to beat back Boko Haram, combined with an increasing number of bombings in the south of the country and high-profile kidnappings, has eroded support for President Jonathan’s administration (even within his traditional southern support base) and has begun

to raise doubts about the central government’s ability to keep Nigeria’s diverse ethnic and religious factions unified.

- **At this time it is unclear how the insurgency will be resolved—it could develop in multiple directions.**
  1. If a stalemate develops, over time Boko Haram could devolve into a criminal or terrorist organization with some factions negotiating truces with the government.
  2. The conflict could expand - leading to the creation of a secessionist “Islamic caliphate” - if Boko Haram can moderate its extremist tactics in order to tap into the vast reserves of anti-government sentiment and religious fundamentalism in the north.
  3. A more ominous (if less likely outcome) could be the “Somaliaization” of Nigeria, if Boko Haram can accelerate Nigeria’s centrifugal forces (ethno-religious divides, power politics, and economic grievances) sufficiently to cause the state to collapse from within.

Given these findings, **we conclude that a new, more comprehensive approach by the Nigerian government—one that seeks to address political, economic, and social grievances—will be needed to degrade and eventually defeat the threat posed by Boko Haram.** Such an approach would also work to moderate the current extremist rejectionist thinking which periodically generates these violent extremist organizations in the northeast of the country. For the U.S. and the rest of the international community, this will mean working with the government of Nigeria on a variety of assistance fronts, including political, developmental, economic, and military.

Partnering with the Nigerian government has been (and most likely will continue to be) a challenge for the United States. Due to a range of complex political, social, and economic reasons, the government of Nigeria has been unable or perhaps unwilling to implement a whole of government approach to the Boko Haram conflict which would necessitate addressing conflict drivers and legitimate grievances. If the U.S. and its international partners continue to participate in efforts to end this conflict, they should consider a range of strategies which take into account the contextual realities of the conflict—some of which may not put Nigeria at the center of the response. In a subsequent report, we will present a number of options for the U.S. government to evaluate.

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## Glossary

|                                            |                                                                                                                                                                       |
|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ANPP                                       | All Nigeria People's Party                                                                                                                                            |
| AQIM                                       | Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb                                                                                                                                       |
| AU                                         | African Union                                                                                                                                                         |
| CJTF                                       | Civilian Joint Task Force                                                                                                                                             |
| COIN                                       | Counterinsurgency                                                                                                                                                     |
| ECOWAS                                     | Economic Community of West African States                                                                                                                             |
| FTO                                        | Foreign Terrorist Organization                                                                                                                                        |
| IED                                        | Improvised explosive device                                                                                                                                           |
| ISIL                                       | Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant                                                                                                                                  |
| Jama'a Ahl as-Sunna<br>Lida'wa wa-al Jihad | Alternate name of Boko Haram, translated as "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad"                                                |
| JTF                                        | Joint Task Force                                                                                                                                                      |
| Juma'atu Ansarul<br>Muslimina Fi Biladis   | Alternate name of Ansaru, the internationally-focused splinter group of Boko Haram whose name translates as "Vanguards for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa" |
| LCBC                                       | Lake Chad Basin Commission                                                                                                                                            |
| MNJTF                                      | Multinational Joint Task Force                                                                                                                                        |
| NBA                                        | Nigerian Bar Association                                                                                                                                              |
| NGO                                        | Non-governmental organization                                                                                                                                         |
| UN                                         | United Nations                                                                                                                                                        |
| VEO                                        | Violent Extremist Organization                                                                                                                                        |

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## Introduction

The United States has long viewed Nigeria (see Figure 1) as a strategically important country and has been engaging with its government both diplomatically and militarily for years. Nigeria is Africa's largest economy, its largest producer of oil, and its most populous country. Its government is a leading actor in regional politics, an important contributor to peacekeeping operations in Africa, and as of this writing, the country holds a rotating seat on the United Nations (UN) Security Council.

Figure 1. Nigeria's administrative divisions



Source: Michael Markowitz, CNA

Since 2009, the Nigerian militant Islamist group *Jama'a Ahl as-Sunna Li-da'wa wa-al Jihad*—or Boko Haram, as it is commonly called—has embarked on a violent insurgent campaign in the northeastern part of the country. Its goal is to expel the political community from northern Nigeria, to remove all Western influences, and eventually to overthrow the national government and establish an Islamic state in its place.<sup>1</sup> Since 2010, this group has been responsible for more terrorist attacks in

<sup>1</sup> National Counterterrorism Center. "Terrorist Groups: Boko Haram." Accessed July 31, 2014. [http://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/boko\\_haram.html](http://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/boko_haram.html).

Nigeria than all other militant groups combined.<sup>2</sup> Its attacks are estimated to have caused over 10,000 fatalities since 2009, making it one of the deadliest militant groups in the world.<sup>3</sup> More than 6 million Nigerians have been affected by its violence, and more than 300,000 have been displaced.<sup>4</sup> Its attacks have destroyed vital infrastructure and have devastated the already weak economy in the northeast of the country. Attacks on the Christian community may also cause pre-existing religious tensions to explode, reversing some of the country's hard-won gains in building national unity, and potentially creating an environment in which Boko Haram could more easily mobilize the Muslim population to its cause. Boko Haram has clearly become the most serious physical threat to stability in Nigeria.

The Nigerian government's military-oriented response has failed to stem the violence. While the Nigerian military has occasionally succeeded in decimating Boko Haram's leadership and rank and file, the group has proven to be adaptive and highly resilient. After declaring a state of emergency in the northeast, the government launched an offensive targeting Boko Haram's safe havens in May 2013. Despite an initial disruption of its activities, in recent months Boko Haram has grown increasingly active and brazen in its attacks on both civilians and government targets.<sup>5</sup> Its tactics have also become increasingly more sophisticated. The failure to contain the violence, the recent bombings in the south and in the Federal Territory of Abuja, and the threats to disrupt the 2015 presidential election have created a crisis of legitimacy for the Nigerian government.

The United States, which designated Boko Haram a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in November 2013, also has concerns that the group could target its diplomatic and economic interests in Nigeria, and beyond, based on revelations of Boko Haram's suspected links to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and more recently to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).<sup>6</sup> U.S. Africa Command officials have

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<sup>2</sup> James J.F. Forest. "Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria," JSOU Report 12-5, Joint Special Operations University, May 2012.

<sup>3</sup> The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). *Background Report: Boko Haram*, May 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Lauren Ploch Blanchard. "Nigeria's Boko Haram: Frequently Asked Questions," CRS Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service, 10 June 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Jacob Zenn. "Leadership Analysis of Boko Haram and Ansaru in Nigeria." *CTC Sentinel* 7; 2 (2014): 1-9. Accessed on 20 June 2014 at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/leadership-analysis-of-boko-haram-and-ansaru-in-nigeria>.

<sup>6</sup> Blanchard, "Nigeria's Boko Haram," CRS Report for Congress, 2014.

suggested that Boko Haram has elements that aspire to a broader level of attacks—not just in Africa, but also in Europe and potentially in the United States.<sup>7</sup>

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The intent of this report is to provide the appropriate type of information—at the appropriate level of granularity—in order to inform U.S. government efforts to develop more effective approaches to countering Boko Haram. The goal is to help U.S. planners and decision-makers understand the conflict as an interconnected system and, eventually, to develop targeted, conflict-sensitive strategies for assisting the Nigerian government. Specifically, this report seeks to diagnose and dissect the conflict by identifying relevant political, economic, social, and security factors at work in northeast Nigeria, by analyzing how key actors mobilize grievances and institutional resiliencies to drive or mitigate conflict, and by forecasting how conflict dynamics might evolve in the future.

## **What is a conflict assessment, and what is its function?**

Military and civilian decision-makers must understand the nature of intrastate conflicts. If an intrastate conflict is misdiagnosed, planners can fail to properly identify and address the root cause of instability and the nature of the threat. Such a misdiagnosis could lead to ineffective assistance programs, or, worse, to interventions which further destabilize a conflict situation.

Broadly speaking, a conflict assessment is an analytical process undertaken to identify and understand the dynamics of violence and instability and to develop an independent, objective view of a conflict. It functions to uncover the crucial elements

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<sup>7</sup> Lauren Ploch. “Nigeria: Current Issues and U.S. Policy,” CRS Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service, 15 November 2013.

of an armed conflict and assess how they interact, in order to assist planners in the development of programs that can most effectively support host nation efforts to manage conflict. Conflict assessments also help ensure that assistance programs are more “conflict sensitive”—that is, to make sure their impact is the intended one.<sup>8</sup>

The conflict assessment framework used in this report was developed by combining relevant elements of existing analytical frameworks designed by various U.S. government agencies and scholars within academia for use in dissecting and understanding internal conflicts, insurgency, and violent extremist organizations (VEOs) (see the *Approach* section below). Our conflict assessment framework consists of seven elements, which we also use to organize the remainder of this paper:

1. **Context:** In this section we map out longstanding conditions resistant to change in Nigeria, immutable facts on the ground, and historical narratives which frame the conflict. Specifically we examine fault lines between ethno-religious communities, fundamentalist and secessionist tendencies in the north, the impact of economic transformation on northern communities, and structural factors such as the “political rules of the game.”
2. **Sources of tension and conflict drivers:** In this section we identify the contemporary sources of tension which likely contributed to Boko Haram’s emergence and the conflict drivers which sustain the group today. Specifically, we examine issues such as the failure of national governance, political exclusion, institutionalized corruption, economic disenfranchisement, and persistent sectarian violence.
3. **Institutional resilience:** In this section we briefly assess a number of state and social dispute resolution institutions, which under normal conditions and in a functioning society, could help resolve conflict through non-violent means. Specifically we examine official state rule of law institutions and the established religious leadership in the north.
4. **Key actors:** Key actors are people and organizations that have an impact on social patterns and institutional performance, are able to shape perceptions and mobilize people, and are able to provide means to support other key actors. In this section we identify and assess the various parties to the conflict, including the Boko Haram militant group, the national government, and important traditional leaders and civil society actors. Specifically, for each actor or group, we examine motivations and grievances, interests, means and resources

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<sup>8</sup> Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, USAID. *Conflict Assessment Framework*. Version 2.0. June 2012.

(including funding and recruitment), relations with other key players, strategies and tactics, capacity, and levels of public support.

5. **Conflict diagnosis:** Based on our analysis of the previous sections, and relying on accepted typologies from internal conflict, counterinsurgency, and counterterrorism literature, in this section we diagnose and categorize the nature of the conflict in northern Nigeria. Because conflicts generally evolve in stages, we also seek to identify the “time phase” in which the conflict currently resides.
6. **Trajectory of the conflict:** In order to develop effective assistance programs, it is crucial that planners and decision-makers not only understand the current state of the conflict but also have a sense of how the conflict is trending. In this section we suggest several potential future scenarios.
7. **Conclusions:** In the concluding section we summarize the preceding chapters and discuss the way ahead for the remainder of the research project.

Before presenting the results of our conflict assessment, we will briefly discuss the approach we took to create it.

## Approach

In order to prepare this conflict assessment, we relied on a four-step approach. First, we developed a framework which helped us model the complexities of the conflict in the northeast and focus our data collection efforts on relevant information that could later facilitate decision-making on the development of counter-Boko Haram programs. In order to develop this framework, we conducted a literature review on various types of conflict assessment methodologies relevant to the situation in Nigeria—i.e., assessment frameworks dealing with internal conflict, counterinsurgency, and countering violent-extremism and terrorism. In addition, we analyzed systems thinking and dynamic causality theories to assist us in moving from a fragmented approach to a more comprehensive analysis which could identify evolving conflict drivers. This literature review yielded best practices commonly utilized by the U.S. government, the international community, and academia to assess internal conflict, armed groups in general, radicalization, and insurgency. We then combined these best assessment practices to produce a more comprehensive, all-inclusive “internal conflict/COIN/C-VEO hybrid” assessment framework.

After developing our hybrid framework, we “filled it in” by analyzing data from a large collection of open-source reports and scholarly literature and by conducting interviews with subject matter experts and government officials. Next we conducted research on how insurgencies conclude, in order to identify the factors which can help predict the course and evolution of internal conflict. Lastly, we reviewed classified documents in order to vet our conclusions and ensure that there were no significant contradictory viewpoints available only in intelligence reporting.

## Sources

The sources utilized in this study consisted mainly of open-source material. We relied heavily on media reporting and academic literature as well as ethno-linguistic and religious maps of Nigeria and online propaganda videos. We also used a variety of unclassified reports prepared by the U.S. government, including various products on conflict assessment prepared by the Department of State, United States Agency for International Development, and the Department of Defense, as well as their counterparts in Sweden and the United Kingdom. In addition, we used material from our interviews with U.S. government officials, intelligence analysts, American subject matter experts, and Nigerian academics with field research experience. For a full list of sources, please see the bibliography at the back of this report.

## Caveats

Before beginning, we must provide a caveat concerning the nature of the data used: Boko Haram by its nature is a secretive group, and accurate reporting on its activities

is lacking. Researchers and journalists responsible for most of the available literature have very limited access to first-hand information. Indeed, foreign and national researchers find it almost impossible to conduct fieldwork in northeastern Nigeria, due to security concerns. As a result, the available literature is often anecdotal and incomplete. Where possible, we triangulated sources to more effectively ensure accuracy. Nevertheless, we recognize the need to conduct additional primary-source research and we recommend that this study be reinforced by a robust, in-country collection effort.

## Context

In this section we identify various long-standing contextual factors which help us frame our analysis. Specifically, we examine Nigeria's demographic fault lines, its socio-economic trends, and the political "rules of the game." Contextual factors matter in conflict assessment, as they may create grievances and opportunities for violence. Contextual factors influence contemporary conflict dynamics and change only incrementally over time.<sup>9</sup>

### Ethno-religious cleavages

With a population close to 180 million and rapidly growing, Nigeria is by far the most populous country in Africa.<sup>10</sup> It is home to a large number of ethno-religious groups, which at times have been at odds with each other over access to resources.

The Hausa and Fulani peoples comprise approximately 29 percent of the population and are concentrated in the far north. The Yoruba comprise 21 percent of the population and are located in the southwest. The Igbo people, at 18 percent, dominate the southeastern portion of the country. In addition to these larger groups, there are dozens of smaller ethnic identities—including the Ijaw (10 percent), Kanuri (4 percent), Ibibio (4 percent), and Tiv (2 percent)—most of which reside in the northern states.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to its ethnic cleavages, Nigeria is split between a predominantly Sunni Muslim north and Christian south.<sup>12</sup> The north-south divide has played prominently in national competition for political power. Violent clashes between Muslims and Christians have been a major feature of the country's "Middle Belt," where the two groups come together.<sup>13</sup> This is shown in Figure 2.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

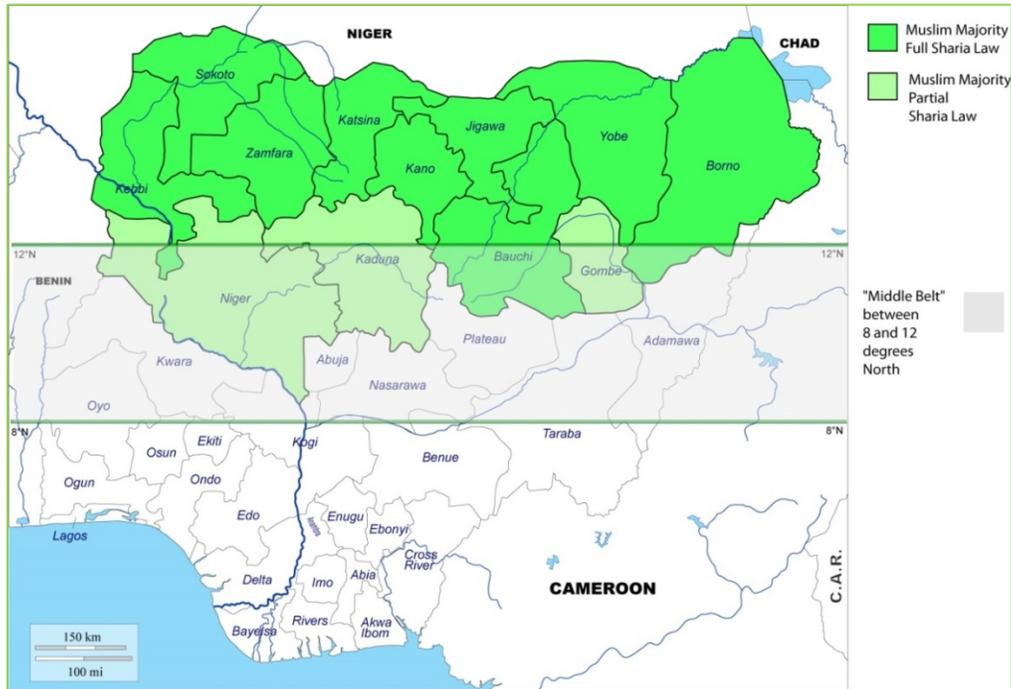
<sup>10</sup> Peter Tinti. "Contextualizing Boko Haram," Beacon, online, 21 April 2014, accessed on 16 June 2014 at <https://www.beaconreader.com/peter-tinti/contextualizing-boko-haram>.

<sup>11</sup> Forest, "Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria," 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Nigeria's Muslim population (roughly seventy-five million) is the sixth largest in the world.

<sup>13</sup> The term 'Middle-Belt' is used to describe the area that runs from Kwara, through the federal capital, Abuja, and down to Benue state.

Figure 2. Muslim states in Nigeria



Source: Michael Markowitz, CNA

Among sectarian factions, inter-ethnic divisions have also historically been a source of tension. In the northeast, for example, the Kanuri people (of which most Boko Haram fighters are members) have long been at variance with the Hausas-Fulanis majority, who form the core of the Nigeria's political and religious leadership. The Kanuris converted to Islam several centuries before the Hausas-Fulanis and they view themselves as the rightful standard-bearers of Islam in Nigeria.<sup>14</sup> The northeast falls under the territory once claimed by the Borno-Kanuri Empire (1380-1893) and has, in large part, remained outside of the influence of the Hausas-Fulanis' Sokoto Caliphate (1804-1903) and its leaders, who have long dominated the northwest.<sup>15</sup> In the

<sup>14</sup> The Soufan Group IntelBrief. "Boko Haram's Local Foreign Fighters, November 13, 2013. Accessed on 25 August 2014 at <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-boko-harams-local-foreign-fighters/>.

<sup>15</sup> The North-West zone includes Sokoto, Kano, Kaduna, Katsina, Kebbi, Jigawa and Zamfara and formed the core area of influence of the Sokoto Caliphate. The Sokoto Caliphate lasted from 1804 until the British abolished the caliphate in 1903. See: Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram's Dangerous Expansion into Northwest Nigeria." *CTC Sentinel* 5; 10 (2012): 1-6. Accessed on 20

northeast, the Shehu of Borno, not the ethnic Fulani Sultan of Sokoto, is the traditional ruler of Borno state.<sup>16</sup>

The Kanuris, who are now marginalized both politically and economically, accuse the Hausa-Fulanis leadership, and in particular the Sultan of Sokoto, of corruption and collusion with the Christian government. Boko Haram uses the Kanuri empire narrative and the group's disenfranchisement to recruit new members.

## Politics and power-sharing

Because of the large number of diverse identity groups, competition over political power has traditionally presented challenges for governance and has been a significant factor in civil unrest.<sup>17</sup> The historical contest for power between north and south that has defined Nigeria's modern political history can be traced in large part to administrative divisions instituted during Britain's colonial administration.<sup>18</sup> Due to economic considerations, in 1914, Nigeria's British rulers combined two of their existing West African protectorates, southern (predominantly Christian) and northern (predominantly Muslim), into one nation.<sup>19</sup> Britain pursued a system of indirect rule in the north, opting to govern the area through its chosen indigenous rulers. This policy, in effect, hardened north-south divisions, and inflamed inter-ethnic schisms within northern Nigeria.<sup>20</sup>

Since gaining its independence from the United Kingdom in 1960, Nigeria's national leadership has been dominated by northern elites. Since the election of President Olusegun Obasanjo from the southwest in 1999, however, northern dominance in the

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June 2014 at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/boko-harams-dangerous-expansion-into-northwest-nigeria>.

<sup>16</sup> Jacob Zenn. "Boko Haram's Dangerous Expansion into Northwest Nigeria." *CTC Sentinel* 5; 10 (2012): 1-6. Accessed on 20 June 2014 at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/boko-harams-dangerous-expansion-into-northwest-nigeria>.

<sup>17</sup> Mohammed Aly Sergie, Online Writer/Editor, and Toni Johnson. "Boko Haram." Background, Council on Foreign Relations, Updated: 5 May 2014, accessed on 23 June 2014 at <http://www.cfr.org/nigeria/boko-haram/p25739>.

<sup>18</sup> Ploch, "Nigeria: Current Issues and U.S. Policy," CRS Report for Congress, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Alex Perry. "Boko Haram: Terror's Insidious New Face." *Newsweek*, online, 9 July 2014, accessed 15 July 2014 at <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/07/18/boko-haram-terrors-insidious-new-face-257935.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Tinti, "Contextualizing Boko Haram," 2014.

political sphere has waned, causing a sense of marginalization and disempowerment among the Muslim population.<sup>21</sup>

In order to tamp down ethno-religious tensions, and to provide an element of predictability in national politics, an informal power-sharing arrangement between the country's unofficial "geopolitical zones" has been in place for the last 15 years.<sup>22</sup> The rotation agreement provides for the nation's political offices to be distributed across the six zones and rotate at the end of each presidential administration.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the presidency and the five other most powerful elected offices—vice president, Senate president, House Speaker, deputy Senate president, and deputy Speaker, as well as the unelected National Party chairman—must shift to a zone that is across the North-South divide.<sup>24</sup>

## Economic transformation

Nigeria has enormous wealth, possessing large amounts of natural resources, including oil, gas, and agricultural land. Its economy has been growing at a rate of nearly 7 percent per year, and it recently surpassed South Africa as Africa's largest economy. It is on track to becoming one of the 20 largest economies in the world by 2020.

Nigeria's new-found prosperity has come with significant costs to its society and political order. As the national economy was deregulated and shifted from agriculture to heavy dependence on oil in the 1970s and 1980s, Nigeria underwent an economic transformation that had far-reaching impacts on the northern population. As the government disposed of all the land and programs it had maintained to support agricultural activities in the area, the agricultural productivity in the north fell sharply.<sup>25</sup> This had follow-on effects for the northern economy. For example, the decline of cotton production in the northern states led to mass closures in the textile

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<sup>21</sup> Leena Koni Hoffman. "Who Speaks for the North? Politics and Influence in Northern Nigeria." *The Royal Institute of International Affairs*, July 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Today, Nigeria is unofficially divided into six ethno-regional geopolitical zones: the northwest (predominantly Muslim Hausa), southwest (predominantly Christian Yoruba), southeast (predominantly Christian Igbo), south (the predominantly Christian Niger Delta minority region), north-central (the religiously divided Middle Belt minorities), and the northeast (Muslim Kanuri).

<sup>23</sup> Ploch, "Nigeria: Current Issues and U.S. Policy," CRS Report for Congress, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, USAID. *Politics by Other Means: Nigeria Conflict Assessment*, August 2012.

<sup>25</sup> Forest, "Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria," 2012.

sector, which in turn led to massive unemployment.<sup>26</sup> In addition, deteriorating transport infrastructure and poor electricity supplies forced a large number of factories in the north to shut down in the 2000s.<sup>27</sup>

Nigeria's "resource curse" has also affected Nigerian society by fueling official corruption, which in turn has delegitimized the political system and has increased economic inequality. The World Bank has estimated that because of corruption, 80 percent of energy revenues benefit only 1 percent of the population.

## History of fundamentalism, rejectionist tendencies, and jihad

Nigeria is a country where Islamist rebellion and insurgency have historical precedence. It has a rich tradition as a center of Islamist thought, including fundamentalist and rejectionist strands of Islam. In the far north, some Muslim communities practice *hijrah*, or self-imposed isolation, and discard modern influences and contemporary institutions and structures.<sup>28</sup> The notion of jihad, or holy war, also has deep historical roots in Nigeria.<sup>29</sup> There have been a number of violent and nonviolent fundamentalist groups throughout the country's history that have used religious justifications to mobilize the population against the government and the established religious elites.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> International Crisis Group. "Northern Nigeria: Background to Conflict." Africa Report No. 168, 20 December 2010.

<sup>27</sup> Hoffman, "Who Speaks for the North? Politics and Influence in Northern Nigeria," 2014.

<sup>28</sup> "Muslim "*hijrah*" groups are those who seek to eschew contemporary institutions and structures. These utopian groups have a long history in Nigeria. In Nigeria, some of these groups have preferred internal exile, establishing isolated communities aloof from the wider world who sought to maintain pure Islamic societies. In a handful of extreme cases, such as Maitetsine in the 1980s and more recently by the Boko Haram movement (see below), when mobilized by charismatic preachers, some *hijrah* groups are capable of violence to resist or overturn the existing national system in favor of an idealized vision of an Islamic state. But such sentiments are not only confined to groups that operate on the fringe, but rather have salience for a great many northern Nigerian Muslims, which manifest in the efforts to reestablish the Shari'a criminal codes in 1999-2000." See: *Politics by Other Means: Nigeria Conflict Assessment*, Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, USAID, August 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Jihad translates most closely as "struggle." In this paper we use the same interpretation preferred by Islamist groups as meaning "holy war."

<sup>30</sup> "Curbing violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency," International Crisis Group, Africa Report No. 216, 3 April 2014; Peter Tinti, "Contextualizing Boko Haram," Beacon, online, 21 April 2014, accessed on 16 June 2014 at <https://www.beaconreader.com/peter-tinti/contextualizing-boko-haram>.

Boko Haram's violent campaign against the Nigerian government echoes two well-known religious revolts in Nigerian history. In the early 19th century, Usman dan Fodio launched a jihad (1802 to 1812) and ultimately founded the Sokoto Caliphate that spanned northern Nigeria and part of Niger.<sup>31</sup> Fodio successfully led ethnic Fulani Muslims against what he saw as the greed and violation of Sharia law by ethnic Hausa Muslim elites.<sup>32</sup> Today, Fodio's Sokoto Caliphate remains an important historical reference point for militant groups contesting the secular Nigerian state and arguing for the implementation of Islamic law.<sup>33</sup>

More recently, the Maitatsine movement of the 1970s and 1980s assumed the jihadi mantle. The group's leader, a Cameroonian preacher named Mohammed Marwa, took up the teachings of Dan Fodio and mobilized the population against what he saw as Nigeria's corrupt, secular government and its allies within the religious establishment.<sup>34</sup> Marwa was killed in 1980, but his influence in the north remained for years.<sup>35</sup> The Maitatsine movement introduced many of the jihadi tactics common in Nigeria today, including the mobilization of poor communities against established urban Muslims, the justification of violence against non-Muslims, and the identification with global Islamic movements.<sup>36</sup>

Today, many within Nigeria's Muslim population are disillusioned with mainstream Islamic leaders whom they see as creatures of an illegitimate and corrupt government. This has created an environment in which fundamentalist and reformist

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<sup>31</sup> "One of the most significant historical events in Nigerian history was the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate in Northern Nigeria in the early nineteenth century. The caliphate was the largest state in Africa at that time and was founded upon the desire to establish an ideal Islamic polity. The caliphate system established semi-autonomous emirates in cities under its control that helped to cement Muslim Hausa and Fulani hegemony over a large segment of modern Nigeria. British colonial administration chose to preserve the emirate system in areas that previously were part of the caliphate as well as in other established Muslim kingdoms in the north, such as Borno, and granted the emirs a great deal of autonomy." See: *Politics by Other Means: Nigeria Conflict Assessment*, Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, USAID, August 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Tinti, "Contextualizing Boko Haram," 2014.

<sup>33</sup> Terje Østebø. "Islamic Militancy in Africa." Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Nov 2012, [http://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/AfricaBriefFinal\\_23.pdf](http://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/AfricaBriefFinal_23.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> Mohammed Marwa received the nickname "Maitatsine", meaning "the one who curses" in Hausa.

<sup>35</sup> Andrew Walker. "What is Boko Haram?" Special Report, US Institute of Peace, June 2012.

<sup>36</sup> International Crisis Group. "Curbing violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency." Africa Report No. 216, 3 April 2014.

movements that espouse Sharia as an alternative to the state retain significant credibility in the eyes of some more-disenfranchised elements of the public.<sup>37</sup>

## **History of secessionist tendencies and challenges to national government authority**

Since achieving independence, Nigeria's national government has continually faced challenges to its authority from a number of armed groups motivated by regional, ethnic, ideological, and religious grievances.

The Biafran War of the late 1960s is the best-known manifestation of secessionist tendencies in post-colonial Nigeria. Also known as the Nigerian Civil War, the Biafran War was an ethnic and political conflict between the Hausas of the north and the Igbo of the southeast, caused by the attempted secession of the southeastern provinces.

Today, a number of secessionist groups are fighting to wrest control of territory and resources from the government. In addition to Boko Haram in the northeast, the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra operates in the southeast, and the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta operate in the south.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, *Politics by Other Means: Nigeria Conflict Assessment*, 2012.

<sup>38</sup> Tinti, "Contextualizing Boko Haram," 2014.

# Sources of Tension and Conflict Drivers

In this section we identify a number of proximate sources of tension and drivers of conflict which have directly contributed to the emergence and sustainment of extremist militant groups such as Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria. These contemporary tensions and drivers promote an environment in which extremist militant groups can more easily gain sympathy for their causes and recruit new members. Specifically, we examine causal and contributing factors, including corruption, unequal resource distribution, unemployment, political competition, religious strife, and the government's employment of indiscriminant violence.

## Systemic corruption and poor governance

Observers agree that many of Nigeria's problems are a result of corruption and poor policy decisions made by government leaders. This official malfeasance has led to the undermining of state authority and legitimacy, and has bred dissent among numerous factions within Nigerian society.<sup>39</sup> According to one analyst, Boko Haram is a "symptom of decades of failed government and elite delinquency finally ripening into social chaos."<sup>40</sup>

The most common grievance among the general population is endemic corruption among political and economic elites. Indeed, Nigeria is consistently ranked as one of the most corrupt countries in the world.<sup>41</sup> A culture of corruption has developed in which government positions are seen as a means to generate private wealth. An alliance between the country's political and economic elites has created a profitable, self-sustaining patronage relationship which, in turn, has made elites highly resistant to changes of the status quo.

In addition to corruption, other important factors—such as government ineptitude, criminality, and a general lack of accountability—also inflame anti-state sentiments in the north. Northern politicians, alongside their counterparts at the federal level, have collectively failed to properly deliver public goods and services or to manage public funds.<sup>42</sup> To preserve their advantages, politicians often use extrajudicial

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<sup>39</sup> Ploch, "Nigeria: Current Issues and U.S. Policy," CRS Report for Congress, 2013.

<sup>40</sup> Forest, "Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria," 2012.

<sup>41</sup> International Crisis Group, "Curbing violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency," 2014.

<sup>42</sup> Hoffman, "Who Speaks for the North? Politics and Influence in Northern Nigeria," 2014.

means, including illegal militias, to coerce or eliminate anyone who may oppose them. Moreover, they regularly manipulate ethno-religious violence and regional differences to their benefit.<sup>43</sup> With government officials often the source of injustice and violence, it is no wonder that many Nigerians no longer trust the country's political, economic, or legal institutions.<sup>44</sup>

When Sharia law was adopted in some northern states, many Muslims believed it would help mitigate corruption and other political ills. However, the unchanged circumstances of the Muslim community after its implementation created even more resentment and anger towards the state government. This disappointment further opened the door for extremist and rejectionist ideologies such as those espoused by Boko Haram.<sup>45</sup>

## **Economic marginalization and unequal resource distribution**

Economic disparities between the north and the rest of the country are stark. Seventy-two percent of northerners live in poverty, compared to 27 percent of southerners and 35 percent in the Niger Delta.<sup>46</sup> The north has roughly half the GDP per capita as the south.<sup>47</sup> The northeastern zone—the area where Boko Haram maintains influence—has the highest poverty rate of any of the six ethno-regional geopolitical zones.<sup>48</sup> In addition, the government in the northeast has been unable or unwilling to provide sufficient security, roads, water, health care, or education, or reliable power.

The poverty and lack of services affecting the northern Muslim population have caused an intense resentment of the political status quo and have fueled extremist and rejectionist thinking.<sup>49</sup> In particular, there is a strong sense among the ethnic

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<sup>43</sup> International Crisis Group, “Curbing violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency,” 2014.

<sup>44</sup> Forest, “Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria,” 2012.

<sup>45</sup> Hoffman, “Who Speaks for the North? Politics and Influence in Northern Nigeria,” 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Mohammed Aly Sergie and Toni Johnson, “Boko Haram,” 2014.

<sup>47</sup> Forest, “Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria,” 2012.

<sup>48</sup> International Crisis Group, “Curbing violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency,” 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Lauren Ploch, “Nigeria: Current Issues and U.S. Policy,” CRS Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service, 15 November 2013; Akinola Olojo, “Nigeria's Troubled North: Interrogating the Drivers of Public Support for Boko Haram,” ICCT Research Paper, International Center for Counterterrorism- The Hague, October 2013.

Kanuri group (from which most members of Boko Haram originate) that they have been economically marginalized and have been cheated out of their fair share of Nigeria's resources by the national government.

The economic disparity between north and south is a byproduct of national-level mismanagement and poor governance on the part of local northern political leaders.<sup>50</sup> Politics in northern Nigeria are dominated by Muslim elites, who, like their counterparts across the country, have personally benefited from oil wealth at the expense of regional development.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, northerners often attribute their economic marginalization to the failures of corrupt *yan boko* (elites trained at secular schools) who are currently in positions of power.<sup>52</sup>

## Underemployed northern youth

In concert with income inequality, there is high unemployment in the north, particularly among young men of fighting age. In some parts of the northeast zone, for example, youth unemployment is estimated to be as high as eighty percent.<sup>53</sup> Even university graduates struggle to find employment.

Decaying infrastructure, chronic energy shortages and an influx of imported products from outside Nigeria have led to massive factory closures in the north.<sup>54</sup> In Kano, for instance, roughly 75 percent of manufacturers went out of business in the 1990s.<sup>55</sup> Finding employment has largely become a matter of one's ability to leverage patron-client relationships and state connections.<sup>56</sup>

Frustration and disaffection have driven many young northerners to join "self-help" ethnic or religious groups, some of which, like Boko Haram, are hostile to the state.

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<sup>50</sup> Akinola Olojo. "Nigeria's Troubled North: Interrogating the Drivers of Public Support for Boko Haram." ICCT Research Paper, International Center for Counterterrorism- The Hague, October 2013.

<sup>51</sup> Mohammed Aly Sergie and Toni Johnson, "Boko Haram," 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Forest, "Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria," 2012.

<sup>53</sup> Michelle Faul. "Nigerians Mark Easter amid Mourning and Fear." Yahoo! News, online, 20 April 2014, accessed on 10 July 2014 at <http://news.yahoo.com/nigerians-mark-easter-amid-mourning-fear-102431121.html>.

<sup>54</sup> International Crisis Group, "Curbing violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency," 2014.

<sup>55</sup> Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, *Politics by Other Means: Nigeria Conflict Assessment*, 2012.

<sup>56</sup> Forest, "Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria," 2012.

In cities such as Kano and Kaduna, many *almajiri*<sup>57</sup> (alms-begging street children) have joined *Yandaba* (adolescent groups that once socialized teenagers into adulthood but have now in many cases become gangs).<sup>58</sup> Some analysts have suggested that the “youth bulge” in Nigeria has increased the supply of economically deprived individuals in the north who are susceptible to recruitment by extremist organizations.<sup>59</sup> Boko Haram has been known to pay poor youth to firebomb schools or to spy on suspected government collaborators.

## Perceived deterioration of the “zone” power sharing arrangement

Nigeria has long struggled to govern a nation in which numerous ethno-religious factions compete for political power.<sup>60</sup> Since the election of President Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999, there has been a power-sharing arrangement between the country’s six ethno-regional zones. The death of Muslim president Umaru Yar’Adua in 2010, two years into his four-year term, and the ascension of his vice president Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from southern Niger Delta, has raised questions about the future of the zone power-sharing arrangement.<sup>61</sup> Today many northerners view the Jonathan administration as illegitimate, arguing that he ignored an informal power-rotation agreement that should have kept a Muslim as president this round.<sup>62</sup>

The sense that the power-sharing arrangement has deteriorated was reinforced by a widespread belief in the north that President Jonathan stole his victory from the Muslim candidate Muhammadu Buhari in the April 2011 election. Following the announcement of the election results, mobs in the north killed an estimated 800 people. Instead of addressing northern concerns of political marginalization by offering Muslims positions in his government, Jonathan surrounded himself with

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<sup>57</sup> In 2005, the National Council for the Welfare of the Destitute estimated there were 7 million *Almajirai* children in northern Nigeria. *Almajiri* are often sent by their families to madrassas and are required to beg for alms to pay for their upkeep. See: “Northern Nigeria: Background to Conflict,” International Crisis Group, Africa Report No. 168, 20 December 2010.

<sup>58</sup> International Crisis Group, “Curbing violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency,” 2014.

<sup>59</sup> Olojo, “Nigeria’s Troubled North,” 2013.

<sup>60</sup> Mohammed Aly Sergie and Toni Johnson, “Boko Haram,” 2014.

<sup>61</sup> Ploch, “Nigeria: Current Issues and U.S. Policy,” CRS Report for Congress, 2013.

<sup>62</sup> Mohammed Aly Sergie and Toni Johnson, “Boko Haram,” 2014.

members of his own Ijaw ethnic group and other Christians from his southern home state.<sup>63</sup>

This shift in political power from northern to southern elites and the apparent collapse of the power-sharing arrangement, combined with widening economic disparities, have fueled a sense of marginalization throughout much of northern Nigeria. This in turn has inflamed popular political discontent and has lent credence to rejectionist narratives.<sup>64</sup>

According to some scholars, northern elites view the current conflict through the lens of north-south power politics, while southern elites view Boko Haram and the anti-Jonathan movement as connected. Ultimately, the north-south rivalry has undermined trust between the presidency and the northern state governors and military commanders and has further complicated the government's attempts to combat extremist groups such as Boko Haram.<sup>65</sup>

## Persistent sectarian strife

Nigeria's contemporary history is punctuated by frequent episodes of sectarian violence. Local political and resource disputes manifest along religious lines, which are then further inflamed by opportunistic politicians.<sup>66</sup> Mainly in the form of urban riots, confrontations have occurred between Muslims and Christians as well as between different Islamic sects.<sup>67</sup> Over the years, and particularly in the last decade, thousands have been killed in religion-motivated violence.<sup>68</sup>

Sectarian violence has been especially prevalent in and around the central Nigerian city of Jos, which is positioned in the "Middle Belt" between the Muslim north and Christian south.<sup>69</sup> While tensions manifest along religious lines, in actuality they stem

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<sup>63</sup> John Campbell. "To Battle Nigeria's Boko Haram, Put Down Your Guns: How to Undermine the Growing Islamist Threat." *Foreign Affairs*, 9 September 2011.

<sup>64</sup> Tinti, "Contextualizing Boko Haram," 2014.

<sup>65</sup> J.N.C. Hill. "Boko Haram, the Chibok Abductions and Nigeria's Counterterrorism Strategy." *CTC Sentinel* 7; 7 (July 2014).

<sup>66</sup> Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, *Politics by Other Means: Nigeria Conflict Assessment*, 2012.

<sup>67</sup> International Crisis Group, "Northern Nigeria: Background to Conflict," 2010.

<sup>68</sup> For example, in 1980, hundreds died as a result of several weeks of rioting sparked by a confrontation between the Maitatsine movement and the Nigerian Police at a rally in Kano state. In 1991, Muslim protestors killed two hundred southern Christians reacting to news of a planned visit by German Christian evangelist Reinhard Bonnke.

<sup>69</sup> "The southern half of the city is mostly Christian, the northern half mostly Muslim. Though the two sides have lived together for hundreds of years, both still describe the Christians as

from competition over resources (e.g., land, education, government jobs) between groups classified as settlers (Muslims) and those classified as original inhabitants (Christians) of the state.<sup>70</sup>

Sectarian tension in Nigeria has taken place in the context of increasing Christian proselytizing in recent years. Christian churches have achieved large-scale conversions among traditional religion practitioners, particularly in the Middle Belt and northeastern states, which threaten to upset the sectarian demographic balance and have given the Muslim community as sense of being under siege.<sup>71</sup>

It is important to note that inter-sectarian violence is not the only religious conflict experienced in Nigeria. A second dimension involves intra-Muslim discord in the north. An early manifestation of this was the 1980s conflict between the fundamentalist Izala movement, which takes a reformist view of Islam, and the established Sufi religious elites. More recent instances of intra-Muslim violence have been the clashes between Sunnis and minority Shia communities in Sokoto state and Zaria, which have been occurring since the mid-1990s.<sup>72</sup>

Though sectarian strife in Nigeria is rooted in a number of contextual factors, the net result has been a polarized, “powder keg” environment that groups such as Boko Haram can readily exploit to recruit new members, mobilize disaffected and embattled communities, and use as a pretext for politically motivated violence.

## **The Nigerian Government’s heavy-handed approach to combating violent extremism**

An additional conflict driver is the government’s heavy-handed use of military force to combat Boko Haram militants in the northeast. Nigeria observers have often cited this heavy-handedness as a major reason that Boko Haram, once a fundamentalist but largely peaceful movement, has turned into a violent insurgent group; further, it now may be using this driver to get new recruits to join its cause.

Before 2009, Boko Haram had not fully committed to violence. After a confrontation with the Nigerian security forces in 2009, hundreds of its followers were killed and

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indigenous and Muslims as incomers.” See: Alex Perry, “Boko Haram: Terror’s Insidious New Face,” *Newsweek*, online, 9 July 2014, accessed 15 July 2014 at <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/07/18/boko-haram-terrors-insidious-new-face-257935.html>.

<sup>70</sup> Ploch, “Nigeria: Current Issues and U.S. Policy,” CRS Report for Congress, 2013.

<sup>71</sup> Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, *Politics by Other Means: Nigeria Conflict Assessment*, 2012.

<sup>72</sup> International Crisis Group, “Northern Nigeria: Background to Conflict,” 2010.

its leader was murdered while in police custody. Thereafter, Boko Haram went underground, rebuilt itself, and then resurfaced under a new and fanatical leadership as a violent extremist organization.

Today the military Joint Task Force (JTF)—a unit comprising army, police, and customs officials tasked with combating Boko Haram—operates like an army of occupation. Unable to distinguish Boko Haram members from innocent civilians, they resort to arbitrary dragnet arrests, collective punishment, illegal detentions, and, in some instances, extra-judicial killings. A recent UN report described the JTF as a unit which “make[s] up for their lack of operational intelligence with a wholly counterproductive willingness to use lethal force.”<sup>73</sup> The JTF are also accused of a host of additional abuses, including rape and theft.

These heavy-handed tactics have further alienated an already wary northern population, which has reduced the Nigerian government’s ability to collect actionable intelligence and has bolstered Boko Haram’s intelligence and support networks. The respected Borno Elders Forum, the Leaders of Thought pressure group, and the chairman of the Borno State branch of the Nigerian Bar Association, have all called for the withdrawal of government troops, arguing that the soldiers have only further aggravated the security situation.<sup>74</sup> According to one resident of Maiduguri, “We don’t have [a] problem with Boko Haram; our problem is the police and the military that harass and kill our innocent people.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Forest, “Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria,” 2012.

<sup>74</sup>James J.F. Forest. “Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria.” JSOU Report 12-5. Joint Special Operations University, May 2012; Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, editor, *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria* (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2014).

<sup>75</sup> Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, editor. *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria* (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2014).

# Institutional Resilience and Conflict Prevention/Mitigation

In functioning societies, various formal and informal mechanisms provide early warning of impending conflict, in order to facilitate negotiated solutions, and to promote post-conflict resolution of disputes. Within the conflict assessment and development literature, the ability to absorb and resolve conflict is often referred to as “institutional resilience.”<sup>76</sup> The performance of formal and informal dispute resolution institutions such as the judiciary, rule-of-law and security forces, and traditional community and religious leadership can either aggravate or contribute to the resolution of conflict. When these institutions fail altogether, the resulting vacuum can generate conditions in which extremist groups can flourish. In northern Nigeria today, both formal and informal conflict mitigation institutions appear to be failing. The audacity of Boko Haram and the impunity of its actions reflect the weakness of both state government and traditional leadership.<sup>77</sup>

## Rule-of-law institutions

According to most accounts, the judiciary in the north is poorly funded and underperforming. In addition, the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) has raised concerns over corrupt practices including bought judgments.<sup>78</sup> As a result, there appears to be very little trust in the formal justice system. The reintroduction of Sharia in twelve states between 1999 and 2002 was supported by many Muslims and some Christians, in large part due to the loss of faith in a corrupt and ineffectual secular judiciary.<sup>79</sup> Yet, the reintroduction of Sharia in the north was not entirely successful, because the implementation by state governors was deemed by many as insincere and the courts themselves were not considered fair.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, USAID, *Conflict Assessment Framework*, 2012.

<sup>77</sup> Pérouse de Montclos, *Boko Haram*, 2014.

<sup>78</sup> International Crisis Group, “Curbing violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency,” 2014.

<sup>79</sup> International Crisis Group, “Northern Nigeria: Background to Conflict,” 2010.

<sup>80</sup> Mohammed Aly Sergie and Toni Johnson, “Boko Haram,” 2014.

## Law enforcement

In terms of law enforcement, police in the north have traditionally been distrusted and seen as corrupt and ineffective.<sup>81</sup> They are often led by corrupt or incompetent officers who fight for their own fiefdom rather than work for the good of the community.<sup>82</sup> Today it is the Nigerian military that is taking the lead in trying to provide order and fight Boko Haram in the north. However, the military—which has traditionally been highly respected as an institution—has thus far failed to stem the violence; instead, it uses excessive force. It is believed to make its enemies “disappear,” which gives credence to militant and fundamentalist anti-state narratives. Today, many northerners view the military as an instrument of southern repression.<sup>83</sup>

## Customary conflict management institutions

Across Nigeria, various customary institutions exist in parallel with the local, state, and federal governments that play an acutely important role in defusing conflicts. In some places, traditional and religious leaders such as emirs, elder councils, and religious leaders are powerful decision-makers. These leaders often play a pivotal role in mobilizing communities (e.g., by establishing dialogue committees or engaging state agencies), in facilitating peace deals, and in promoting communication across ethnic and religious divides.<sup>84</sup> For a country plagued by religious and ethnic tensions, the absence of widespread conflict is a testament to the effectiveness of such customary dispute resolution and peace-building mechanisms.<sup>85</sup>

In the north, however, traditional leaders have failed to prevent the formation of violent groups such as Boko Haram. While the Sultan of Sokoto (the religious leader of the majority of Nigeria’s Muslims in the northwest) has condemned violent extremism, his influence, and the influence of other established religious leaders, appears to be fading.<sup>86</sup> According to Nigeria observers, the failure of religious leaders

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<sup>81</sup> Author’s interview, U.S. Government officials, 15 August 2014.

<sup>82</sup> Walker, “What is Boko Haram?” 2012.

<sup>83</sup> Hussein Solomon. “Counter-terrorism in Nigeria: Responding to Boko Haram.” *Royal United Service Institute Journal*, August 2012.

<sup>84</sup> Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, *Politics by Other Means: Nigeria Conflict Assessment*, 2012.

<sup>85</sup> International Crisis Group, “Northern Nigeria: Background to Conflict,” 2010.

<sup>86</sup> Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, editor, *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria* (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2014); Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria, James J.F. Forest, Joint Special Operations University, May 2012

to restrain militants and fundamentalist groups is mainly due to their diminished moral authority. Many functionaries from the various religious factions in the north are themselves said to be entangled in the web of government corruption and are seen to be protecting an unjust system.<sup>87</sup> Many northern Muslims are disgusted by infighting among religious leaders who compete for political patronage and collect monthly subventions.<sup>88</sup>

In addition to accusations of corruption, mainstream Islamic leaders have been further weakened by their internal divisions. Many analysts argue that Boko Haram is actually a symptom of a divided *umma* and the failure of the Muslim leadership in the north to develop a common vision for the future. The two dominant religious organizations in northeast, the Tijaniyya Sufi brotherhood and the Salafist Izala group, cannot agree on an alternative model of an Islamic society which they might promote against the extreme orthodoxy of militant groups such as Boko Haram.<sup>89</sup> Even their shared goal of establishing Sharia law in the north has failed to unite them.

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<sup>87</sup> Forest, "Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria," 2012.

<sup>88</sup> Leena Koni Hoffman, "Who Speaks for the North? Politics and Influence in Northern Nigeria," *The Royal Institute of International Affairs*, July 2014; Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, editor, *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria* (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2014).

<sup>89</sup> Pérouse de Montclos, *Boko Haram*, 2014.

## Key Actors

Opportunities for violence normally do not lead to conflict in the absence of political entrepreneurs who can link grievances to a political agenda and mobilize populations.<sup>90</sup> In this section we identify and assess the various parties to the conflict. We focus on Boko Haram, but also touch on the government as well as traditional leaders and civil society actors. For each key actor, we examine motivations and grievances, interests, means, and resources.

### **Boko Haram (aka *Jama'a Ahl as-Sunna Li-da'wa wa-al Jihad*)**

Boko Haram came into being circa 2002-2003 as a fringe Sunni prayer group under the leadership of Mohammed Yusuf. Yusuf was a charismatic, fundamentalist Salafist scholar whose literal interpretation of the Quran led him to advocate forbidding certain aspects of Western education.<sup>91</sup> Calling itself *Jama'a Ahl as-Sunna Li-da'wa wa-al Jihad* (roughly translated from Arabic as “People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad”), the group is more popularly known as Boko Haram (often translated as “Western education is forbidden”). It grew out of a group of radical Islamist youth who worshipped at the Al- Haji Muhammadu Ndimi Mosque in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state, in the 1990s. Former members of the Nigerian Taliban, a small, violent movement active in 2002-2004, also appear to have joined Boko Haram’s ranks.<sup>92</sup>

In the early years, Boko Haram was a largely peaceful movement and for the most part was left alone by the government. The group established a religious complex that included a mosque and a school where poor families could enroll their children.<sup>93</sup> Observers say the group constructed a “state within a state,” with a cabinet, its own religious police, and a large farm for food production. Over time the

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<sup>90</sup> “The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency,” USAID Policy, September 2011; *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*. FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5, C1, Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington, DC, 2 June 2014.

<sup>91</sup> International Crisis Group, “Curbing violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency,” 2014.

<sup>92</sup> Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, *Politics by Other Means: Nigeria Conflict Assessment*, 2012.

<sup>93</sup> Wikipedia contributors. “Boko Haram.” *Wikipedia*, accessed on 20 June 2014 at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boko\\_Haram](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boko_Haram).

movement expanded its presence into other areas, including Bauchi, Yobe, and Niger states.<sup>94</sup>

While still critical of the government, Yusuf was involved in official efforts to introduce and implement Sharia in several northern states in the early 2000s.<sup>95</sup> By 2008, however, Boko Haram had begun taking a more militant stance and began storing small arms in its headquarters in Maiduguri and Bauchi. On 11 June 2009, an encounter with the police turned violent. Nigeria had recently passed a law mandating the use of motorcycle helmets, but during a funeral procession to bury some of their members who had died in a car accident, Boko Haram members refused to adhere to the new law. The police saw this as a challenge to their authority from an increasingly confrontational group that had to be dealt with.<sup>96</sup> Anger at what were perceived to be heavy-handed police tactics then triggered an armed, five-day uprising in the northern state of Bauchi and spread into the states of Borno, Yobe, and Kano. The revolt resulted in a violent crackdown by the security services which left more than 800 dead.<sup>97</sup> The confrontation ended when the police captured and executed Mohammed Yusuf, his father-in-law, and several other Boko Haram members.<sup>98</sup>

After Yusuf's death Boko Haram went underground to regroup. During this period, Boko Haram transformed itself from a *dawah* (proselytization) movement into an armed militant group which sought to expel the northern political establishment and eventually, to overthrow the national government.<sup>99</sup> In 2010 it reemerged under new leadership.

Boko Haram's new spiritual leader and operational commander—Abubakar Shekau—is far more radical than Yusuf.<sup>100</sup> Under his leadership, Boko Haram has adopted the tactics of international Jihadi terrorist groups including targeted assassinations, deployment of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), suicide bombings, and most recently, kidnapping and hostage taking.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Walker, "What is Boko Haram?" 2012.

<sup>95</sup> Østebø, "Islamic Militancy in Africa," 2012.

<sup>96</sup> Forest, "Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria," 2012.

<sup>97</sup> Mohammed Aly Sergie and Toni Johnson, "Boko Haram," 2014.

<sup>98</sup> Freedom Onuoha. "Why Do Youth Join Boko Haram?" USIP, 9 June 2014; John Campbell. "To Battle Nigeria's Boko Haram, Put Down Your Guns: How to Undermine the Growing Islamist Threat." *Foreign Affairs*, 9 September 2011.

<sup>99</sup> Pérouse de Montclos, *Boko Haram*, 2014.

<sup>100</sup> Forest, "Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria," 2012.

<sup>101</sup> Østebø, "Islamic Militancy in Africa," 2012.

## Motivations and grievances

Although Boko Haram's ideology is framed in religious terms, its motivations are linked to more earthly grievances. Since the killing of Mohammed Yusuf in 2009, Boko Haram's leaders have largely been driven by a desire for revenge against those politicians, police, and mainstream Islamic leaders it holds responsible for the suppression of the group.<sup>102</sup>

Core Boko Haram members also claim to be motivated by a belief that the political elites in northern Nigeria are false Muslims who are enriching themselves at the expense of the Muslim community by cooperating with the Christian-dominated government and its secular democratic system.<sup>103</sup> At a more fundamental level, they see the corruption of Nigerian society, politics, and education by Western influences as the root cause of the Muslim North's decline.<sup>104</sup> Like previous Nigerian jihadi groups from the northeast, Boko Haram believes that the problems that plague Nigerian society, such as poverty and inequality, would be remedied by adherence to Sharia law.<sup>105</sup>

Some Nigeria watchers believe that the group is motivated by inter-ethnic disputes as much as by religion.<sup>106</sup> Indeed, the minority Kanuri ethnic group—which once ruled the Kanuri-Borno Empire in northern Nigeria, and which today forms the core membership of Boko Haram—is marginalized both politically and economically. The Kanuris accuse the majority Hausa-Fulanis ethnic group, which forms the bulk of the northern political and economic elite, of discrimination and corruption. Nevertheless, Boko Haram seeks to downplay the inter-ethnic component, likely in an attempt to recruit and receive support from a wider base, by claiming: “[T]his is a war between Muslims and non-[M]uslims... this is not a tribal war, nor is it ... a war for financial gains, it is solely a religious war.”<sup>107</sup>

## Objectives

Boko Haram's objectives are to overthrow the secular Nigerian state, dismantle its institutions, and impose its own interpretation of Islamic Sharia law across all of

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<sup>102</sup> Walker, “What is Boko Haram?” 2012.

<sup>103</sup> Olojo, “Nigeria's Troubled North,” 2013.

<sup>104</sup> Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, *Politics by Other Means: Nigeria Conflict Assessment*, 2012.

<sup>105</sup> Michael Olufemi Sodipo. “Mitigating Radicalism in Northern Nigeria.” Africa Center for Strategic Studies, August 2013.

<sup>106</sup> Wikipedia contributors, “Boko Haram,” 2014.

<sup>107</sup> Pérouse de Montclos, *Boko Haram*, 2014.

Nigeria.<sup>108</sup> According to a Boko Haram spokesperson speaking in 2009, “We have started a jihad in Nigeria which no force on earth can stop. The aim is to Islamize Nigeria and ensure the rule of the majority Muslims in the country.”<sup>109</sup> Along the way, Boko Haram also seeks to rid Nigeria of any Western influences.<sup>110</sup>

At a more tactical level, Boko Haram's goals include the release of its senior members who have been arrested, the return of property that has been taken from the group, and the certitude that the state officials responsible for the execution of Mohammed Yusuf and other members of the group are held accountable and punished.<sup>111</sup> Other demands are outlandish. For example, Boko Haram has demanded that President Goodluck Jonathan convert to Islam.<sup>112</sup>

## Strategy

While Boko Haram has openly articulated its objectives, and has clearly chosen subversion, guerilla tactics, and terrorism as its means, its actual strategy is largely opaque. Some analysts speculate that in actuality Boko Haram has no strategy and its actions are simply the result of trial and error.<sup>113</sup>

Analysis of its actions and statements suggests that Boko Haram's strategy may simply be to destabilize the north so that it can one day push out the traditional northern elites who control the government and establish an Islamic caliphate in their place. Once this has been accomplished, they can use their gains as leverage to compromise and eventually overthrow the national government.<sup>114</sup> Mostly likely, Boko Haram's strategy is rooted in creating as much chaos as possible to weaken the government, while at the same time accelerating Nigeria's centrifugal forces (ethno-religious divides, power politics, and economic grievances) sufficiently to cause the state to collapse from within. Abu Qaqa, the group's best-known spokesman, put it

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<sup>108</sup> The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), *Background Report: Boko Haram*, May 2014; Jacob Zenn, “Boko Haram's Dangerous Expansion into Northwest Nigeria.” *CTC Sentinel* 5; 10 (2012): 1-6. Accessed on 20 June 2014 at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/boko-harams-dangerous-expansion-into-northwest-nigeria>.

<sup>109</sup> Peter Lacey. “The Emergence of Boko Haram: an Analysis of Terrorist Characteristics.” Australian Counter Terrorism Conference, Edith Cowan University, December 2012.

<sup>110</sup> National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism, *Background Report: Boko Haram*, 2014.

<sup>111</sup> Walker, “What is Boko Haram?” 2012.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> Author's interviews, U.S. Government officials, Washington, DC, 22 July 2014.

<sup>114</sup> Author's interview, Jacob Zenn, Jamestown Foundation, phone interview, 16 July 2014.

succinctly: “Our objective is to place Nigeria in a difficult position and even destabilize it and replace it with Sharia.”<sup>115</sup>

In part, this was also the strategy of the group under the leadership of Mohammed Yusuf. Yusuf wanted to set up a state-like organization, operating initially on a small scale, parallel to the federal government. He believed that his organization would inevitably grow until it would replace the actual state. Prior to 2009 the group had many “state-like” functions, such as providing welfare handouts, job training, and a “moral police.”<sup>116</sup>

However, under Boko Haram’s current leadership, governance functions have largely ceased. While the group does use its resources to pay the widows of slain members, it does not engage in any form of nonviolent or conventional political activity; nor does it have a detectible shadow governance system. It has never actually proposed a political program through which it could establish a caliphate or govern Nigeria according to Sharia law.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, while it has managed to take over an increasing numbers of villages in recent months (e.g., Dambao, Gwoza, Buni Yadi, Gamboru, and Madagali) by razing them to the ground, planting its flag, and fighting off security forces, it currently has little ability to actually administer territory or control people other than nascent and clumsy attempts to impose sharia law.<sup>118</sup>

## Ideology

Insurgencies require an ideological catalyst to mobilize disenfranchised segments of the population against a specific goal—what historian of revolution George Rudé calls “a common vocabulary of hope and protest.”<sup>119</sup> Boko Haram is the latest in a long list of northern fundamentalist movements that have tapped into Muslim revivalism using Usman dan Fodio’s Sokoto Caliphate as a key reference point.<sup>120</sup> At the most basic level, Boko Haram’s ideology stems from founder Muhammed Yusuf’s beliefs in strict adherence to the Quran and the Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammed), and their interpretation as sanctioned by Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyyah, a

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<sup>115</sup> International Crisis Group, “Curbing violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency,” 2014.

<sup>116</sup> Walker, “What is Boko Haram?” 2012.

<sup>117</sup> Pérouse de Montclos, *Boko Haram*, 2014.

<sup>118</sup> Author’s interviews, U.S. Government officials, Washington, DC, 22 July 2014.

<sup>119</sup> Thomas R. Mockaitis. “Resolving Insurgencies.” Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, June 2011.

<sup>120</sup> International Crisis Group, “Curbing violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency,” 2014.

14th century scholar and an important figure for extremist Salafist groups.<sup>121</sup> Taymiyya believed that Muslim communities were made to suffer because their leaders were not true to the faith. He preached that it was necessary to engage in active jihad (or holy war) in order to defend the *ummah* (global community of Muslims) and spread the faith, and that a leader who did not enforce Sharia law completely, and wage active jihad against infidels, was unfit to rule.<sup>122</sup>

Today Boko Haram argues that a jihad against the state and an Islamization of society from the ground up are the prerequisites for establishing an Islamic caliphate in Nigeria. The group rejects secularism and Western influence in general, which it considers to be the source of secularist ideology.<sup>123</sup> Such thinking was also evident in Boko Haram's early years under Yusuf, as it was opposed to Western education and argued for severing any connections to the secular state by seeking *hijra* ("refuge") to maintain religious purity.<sup>124</sup>

Boko Haram also espouses a Takfiri ideology that permits declaring other Muslims infidels ("unbelievers") and targeting them for death. In his sermons, Shekau has cited influential Salafists, such as Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Wahhab, to argue that any Muslim who pledged allegiance to the Nigerian flag or associated with Christians was an infidel.<sup>125</sup>

## Organization

Since the 2009 revolt, Boko Haram has evolved into a more dynamic and decentralized organization.<sup>126</sup> According to most accounts, Boko Haram has a diffuse, cell-like structure.<sup>127</sup> The core group is run by a Shura Council which has 10 to 30 members and is led by Shekau.<sup>128</sup> Each member of the council is responsible for a cell, and each cell is focused on a different functional task (e.g., bomb making, kidnapping, bank robbery) or assigned to a specific geographical area.<sup>129</sup> Cell

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<sup>121</sup> National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism, *Background Report: Boko Haram*, 2014.

<sup>122</sup> Forest, "Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria," 2012.

<sup>123</sup> International Crisis Group, "Northern Nigeria: Background to Conflict," 2010.

<sup>124</sup> Østebø, "Islamic Militancy in Africa," 2012.

<sup>125</sup> Zenn, "Leadership Analysis of Boko Haram and Ansaru in Nigeria," 2014.

<sup>126</sup> Pérouse de Montclos, *Boko Haram*, 2014.

<sup>127</sup> Peter Tinti, "Contextualizing Boko Haram," Beacon, online, 21 April 2014, accessed on 16 June 2014 at <https://www.beaconreader.com/peter-tinti/contextualizing-boko-haram>; Author's interview, Jacob Zenn, Jamestown Foundation, phone interview, 16 July 2014.

<sup>128</sup> Author's interviews, U.S. Government officials, Washington, DC, 22 July 2014.

<sup>129</sup> Walker, "What is Boko Haram?" 2012.

commanders or *amirs* follow central guidance but preserve their operational autonomy. Cells likely come together in a confederation to launch major attacks, to pool resources, and to coordinate their public relations strategy.<sup>130</sup>

Various splinter groups have also emerged, the most prominent being the group commonly referred to as Ansaru, which formed in 2012 and has since been reabsorbed or has gone dormant (its full Arabic name, *Juma'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis* Sudan, translates to “Vanguards for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa”). Unlike core Boko Haram, Ansaru explicitly targeted Westerners in Nigeria and neighboring countries, and avoided indiscriminately killing innocent Muslims.<sup>131</sup> Some analysts speculated that Ansaru became Nigeria’s al-Qaeda franchise and later went dormant.<sup>132</sup>

## Leadership

The Shura Council is Boko Haram’s head council and highest decision-making organ, and all cells of the organization are represented on the council. The council has authorized Boko Haram’s more complex and sophisticated attacks since the July 2009 revolt.<sup>133</sup> The group’s actions are agreed on at the council level, but individual cell commanders have a great deal of autonomy in day-to-day operations.<sup>134</sup> Contrary to some media reports, some U.S. officials now believe that the group’s leadership is fully in control of the cells and various factions, with a more structured command and control than previously supposed.<sup>135</sup>

Currently, Abubakar Shekau (whose nom de guerre is Imam Abu Mohammed Abubakar bin Muhammed Shekau) is the leader of Boko Haram and heads the Shura Council. Shekau is a Kanuri from Shekau village on the border with Niger in Yobe state. In 1990 he moved to Maiduguri and studied under a traditional cleric before entering the Borno State College of Legal and Islamic Studies. He has been a divisive leader, on occasion taking decisions without referring them to the council, but has legitimacy because he was Yusuf’s deputy and remained close to grassroots followers

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<sup>130</sup> Jacob Zenn. “Boko Haram and the Kidnapping of the Chibok Schoolgirls.” *CTC Sentinel*, 7; 5 (2014): 1-8. Accessed on 20 June 2014 at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/boko-haram-and-the-kidnapping-of-the-chibok-schoolgirls>.

<sup>131</sup> Tinti, “Contextualizing Boko Haram,” 2014.

<sup>132</sup> International Crisis Group, “Curbing violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency,” 2014.

<sup>133</sup> Pérouse de Montclos, *Boko Haram*, 2014.

<sup>134</sup> Walker, “What is Boko Haram?” 2012.

<sup>135</sup> Author’s interviews, U.S. Government officials, Washington, DC, 22 July 2014.

in Borno.<sup>136</sup> Shekau was chosen after Yusuf's death because he was more radical and aggressive.<sup>137</sup> Under his leadership Boko Haram has grown more ruthless, more violent, and less open to dialogue.<sup>138</sup>

Some Nigeria watchers believe Shekau is unstable and that his use of extreme violence, including the targeting of the population, has in effect squandered any grassroots support the group once had. A change in leadership and tactics, they speculate, could result in increased public support for the group.<sup>139</sup>

## Membership

The members that make up the main Boko Haram faction and its leadership are overwhelmingly of the Kanuri ethnic group.<sup>140</sup> The exact strength of the group is unknown, and estimates vary significantly. The State Department estimates the number of Boko Haram fighters in the hundreds to low thousands.<sup>141</sup> Another estimate from Cameroon puts the number of fighters closer to 10,000-20,000.<sup>142</sup>

Boko Haram's membership is stratified. According to U.S. officials, the group, separate from its ideological core, draws support from a broader following of young men who are motivated by a variety of grievances and ethno-religious disputes, as well as a desire for power and financial gain.<sup>143</sup> Boko Haram's rank and file includes impoverished northern Islamic students and clerics as well as professionals who are unemployed.<sup>144</sup> Though experts and analysts are not in total agreement, anecdotal evidence suggests that foreign fighters from Chad, Mauritania, Niger, Somalia, and Sudan have also joined Boko Haram.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Walker, "What is Boko Haram?" 2012.

<sup>137</sup> International Crisis Group, "Curbing violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency," 2014.

<sup>138</sup> Zenn, "Leadership Analysis of Boko Haram and Ansaru in Nigeria," 2014.

<sup>139</sup> Author's interview, U.S. Government officials, 15 August 2014; Author's interviews, U.S. Government officials, Washington, DC, 22 July 2014.

<sup>140</sup> Author's interview, Jacob Zenn, Jamestown Foundation, phone interview, 16 July 2014.

<sup>141</sup> U.S. Department of State. *Country Reports on Terrorism 2013*. April 2014.

<sup>142</sup> "Cameroon Furious and Fearful over Boko Haram Infiltration." *The New Age*, July 12, 2014. Accessed on July 21, 2014 at <http://www.thenewage.co.za/mobi/Detail.aspx?NewsID=131357&CatID=1020>.

<sup>143</sup> Ploch, "Nigeria: Current Issues and U.S. Policy," CRS Report for Congress, 2013.

<sup>144</sup> Mohammed Aly Sergie and Toni Johnson, "Boko Haram," 2014.

<sup>145</sup> Tinti, "Contextualizing Boko Haram," 2014.

Based on the analysis of 144 arrested Boko Haram members, a recent study has shown that the median age of the group's members is 30 years.<sup>146</sup> Nevertheless, children, who range from 9 to 15 years in age, have also been recruited by Boko Haram and are forced to traffic weapons, carry stolen items, and hide guns after attacks.<sup>147</sup>

## Area of operations

Boko Haram's main area of operations includes sections of the northeastern states of Borno, Adamawa, Kaduna, Bauchi, Yobe, and Kano.<sup>148</sup> Most of Boko Haram's attacks have been limited to the northeast, but the group has shown that it can conduct attacks across the breadth of northern Nigeria, including in the strategic state of Sokoto.<sup>149</sup>

Since 2009, Boko Haram's attacks have increasingly spread south and west (see Figure 3). By the end of 2011, the group had conducted attacks in the towns of Kano, Katsina, Bauchi, Jos, and Gombe, and in the nation's capital, Abuja.<sup>150</sup> In June 2014, Boko Haram claimed responsibility for a series of explosions in the city of Lagos, located in the far south of the country.<sup>151</sup> Boko Haram has also begun to attack targets outside of Nigeria. It has conducted raids and kidnappings in Cameroon, Niger, and Chad.<sup>152</sup>

In recent months, military offensives and the creation of vigilante groups have weakened their positions in Borno and Yobe states and pushed them out to the border areas.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Freedom Onuoha. "Why Do Youth Join Boko Haram?" USIP, 9 June 2014.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Author's interview, Jacob Zenn, Jamestown Foundation, phone interview, 16 July 2014; Wikipedia contributors, "Boko Haram," *Wikipedia*, accessed on 20 June 2014 at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boko\\_Haram](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boko_Haram).

<sup>149</sup> Zenn, "Boko Haram's Dangerous Expansion into Northwest Nigeria," 2012.

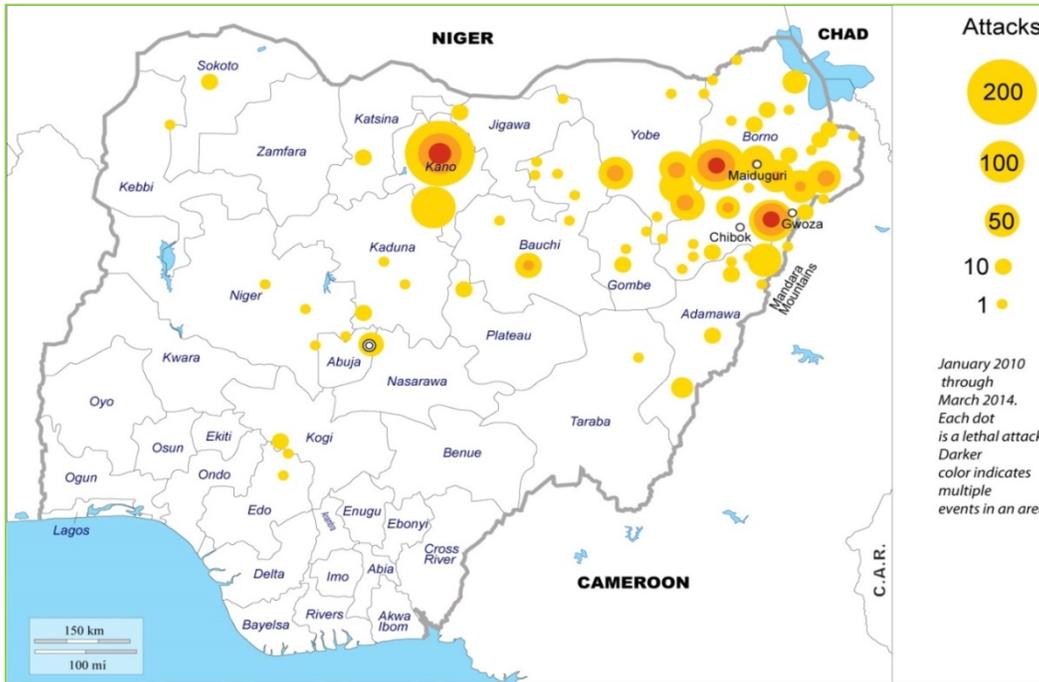
<sup>150</sup> Forest, "Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria," 2012.

<sup>151</sup> "The Insurgency in Nigeria Reaches Lagos: Boko Haram Extends Its Reach." *The Economist*, online, 15 July 2014, accessed 20 July 2014 at <http://www.economist.com/blogs/baobab/2014/07/insurgency-nigeria-reaches-lagos>.

<sup>152</sup> Author's interview, Atta Barkindo, Ph.D. candidate, SOAS University of London, phone interview, 25 July 2014.

<sup>153</sup> Pérouse de Montclos, *Boko Haram*, 2014.

Figure 3. Boko Haram attacks, January 2010 – March 2014



Source: ACLED (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data). Derived from map prepared by Reuters and appearing in "Nigerian Islamists Kill 12 in Village Attack," Reuters, February 28, 2014. From: <http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/02/27/nigeria-bokoharam-idINDEEA1Q0GY20140227>.

## Tactics

Boko Haram employs both guerilla and terrorist tactics. The group has proven itself to be highly adaptable. It has evolved quickly, and its planning attacks have become more sophisticated.<sup>154</sup> In recent years, Boko Haram's methods have advanced from poorly planned confrontations with state security forces, to the use of complex IEDs, targeted assassinations, ambushes, drive-by shootings, suicide bombings, car bombs, and kidnappings.<sup>155</sup> Its newfound operational sophistication, particularly in the construction of IEDs, is one of the main reasons why security experts believe the group has received support from foreign Jihadi militant groups, such as AQIM.<sup>156</sup>

<sup>154</sup> Sodip, "Mitigating Radicalism in Northern Nigeria," 2013.

<sup>155</sup> Onuoha, "Why Do Youth Join Boko Haram?" 2014.

<sup>156</sup> Pérouse de Montclos, *Boko Haram*, 2014.

Fighters also continue to inflict a heavy toll using small arms and arson.<sup>157</sup> On some of their larger raids, they have amassed hundreds of fighters.<sup>158</sup>

Boko Haram has also shown proficiency in reconnaissance, surveillance, and intelligence gathering. Its 2011 attack on the UN compound—located in the diplomatic district of Abuja, where numerous high-profile facilities are located—demonstrated that Boko Haram has the ability to spot a soft target amid harder targets such as foreign embassies and government buildings. The group also managed to find and exploit the security gap at the exit gate.<sup>159</sup>

Other Boko Haram tactics have included:

- Obtaining weapons by attacking police stations and military installations
- Assassinating traditional leaders of civil society, and collaborators<sup>160</sup>
- When security forces redeploy, returning to that location and seeking revenge on the population for “supporting” the military<sup>161</sup>
- Setting up checkpoints to loot or ambush passersby<sup>162</sup>
- Targeting churches to trigger retaliatory violence in order to inflame religious tensions and force Nigerian Muslims to take sides<sup>163</sup>
- Intentionally provoking the military in order to kill civilians in the crossfire<sup>164</sup>
- Bribing children to report neighbors who are unsympathetic to the group.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Blanchard, “Nigeria’s Boko Haram,” CRS Report for Congress, 2014.

<sup>158</sup> Author’s interview, Jacob Zenn, Jamestown Foundation, phone interview, 16 July 2014.

<sup>159</sup> Forest, “Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria,” 2012.

<sup>160</sup> As part of its “grand plans to Islamize Nigeria,” Boko Haram has sought to transfer religious authority from the Sultan of Sokoto and other traditional leaders to Boko Haram’s religious leaders through a campaign of intimidation and assassination.

<sup>161</sup> Sodipo, “Mitigating Radicalism in Northern Nigeria,” 2013.

<sup>162</sup> Author’s interview, Jacob Zenn, Jamestown Foundation, phone interview, 16 July 2014.

<sup>163</sup> These bombings, which often occur on Sundays or religious holidays to achieve maximum effect, have sparked deadly reprisal attacks by Christians against Muslim civilians. Such attacks may be part of a deliberate effort to foment instability and inflame sectarian tensions. It has also been suggested that attacking Christians is a way to force Nigerian Muslims to take sides.

<sup>164</sup> Pérouse de Montclos, *Boko Haram*, 2014.

<sup>165</sup> Sodipo, “Mitigating Radicalism in Northern Nigeria,” 2013.

## Targets

Since 2009 Boko Haram has conducted assaults on a wide array of targets, including politicians, security forces, clerics who have been critical of its ideology, village chiefs, health workers, ordinary villagers, markets, schools, bus stations, beer halls, hospitals, clinics, banks, religious buildings, police stations, government buildings, and military installations.<sup>166</sup> Cell phone towers and newspaper offices have also recently been attacked.<sup>167</sup>

In terms of percentage, Boko Haram's most common targets are: private citizens and property (25 percent of attacks), police (22 percent of attacks), government targets (11 percent), religious figures and institutions (10 percent of attacks), and the military (9 percent of attacks).<sup>168</sup>

High-profile attacks include a suicide car bomb attack on the United Nations building in Abuja, the kidnapping of 300 school girls, and the kidnapping of the wife of Cameroon's deputy prime minister. Boko Haram is also believed to be responsible for killing the Shehu of Borno's brother. The Shehu is considered the most important traditional Islamic ruler in northeast Nigeria, generally regarded as second only to the Sultan of Sokoto within the Islamic emirate hierarchy.<sup>169</sup>

In terms of body count, Boko Haram's deadliest attacks include a coordinated series of bombings in Kano, northern Nigeria's largest city, that killed more than 180 people in January 2012; an attack on the village of Benisheikh in September 2013 that killed more than 160 civilians; and an assault on another northeastern village, Gamboro, that may have killed more than 300 people in early May 2014.<sup>170</sup> Many of the attacks on villages appear to be retaliatory—i.e., attacks on people who have spoken out against the group or informed against it to the government, participated in self-defense groups, or cooperated with the government in some other way.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Peter Tinti, "Contextualizing Boko Haram," Beacon, online, 21 April 2014, accessed on 16 June 2014 at <https://www.beaconreader.com/peter-tinti/contextualizing-boko-haram>; Mohammed Aly Sergie, Online Writer/Editor, and Toni Johnson, "Boko Haram," Background, Council on Foreign Relations, Updated: 5 May 2014, accessed on 23 June 2014 at <http://www.cfr.org/nigeria/boko-haram/p25739>; Michael Olufemi Sodipo, "Mitigating Radicalism in Northern Nigeria," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, August 2013.

<sup>167</sup> Ploch, "Nigeria: Current Issues and U.S. Policy," CRS Report for Congress, 2013.

<sup>168</sup> National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism, *Background Report: Boko Haram*, 2014.

<sup>169</sup> Forest, "Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria," 2012.

<sup>170</sup> Blanchard, "Nigeria's Boko Haram," CRS Report for Congress, 2014.

<sup>171</sup> Author's interviews, U.S. Government officials, Washington, DC, 22 July 2014.

Boko Haram appears to be growing more audacious; it has recently carried out several large-scale attacks on heavily fortified military targets.<sup>172</sup> In December 2013, for example, around 200 insurgents—dressed in military uniforms and armed with rocket launchers, explosives, and assault rifles—infiltrated Maiduguri and conducted coordinated attacks on the air force base and a military barracks.<sup>173</sup> On a few occasions, it has even attacked prisons.<sup>174</sup>

## Funding

Boko Haram is known to sustain its operations through diverse funding activities. Before the group morphed into a violent insurgent organization in 2009, it relied heavily on membership dues as well as foreign donations.<sup>175</sup> Boko Haram's first leader, Mohammed Yusuf, was said to have received funds from external Salafi contacts, which he used to fund microcredit schemes for his followers and to give welfare, food, and shelter to refugees and unemployed youth.<sup>176</sup> While Boko Haram remained a quasi-legal religious movement, it also enjoyed a limited level of local patronage, including donations from businessmen, politicians, and government officials.

As a militant insurgent organization, Boko Haram now finances its operations through local criminal activities such as bank robberies,<sup>177</sup> robbing cash-in-transit convoys, assassinations for hire, and trafficking illegal weapons and drugs.<sup>178</sup> Boko Haram also employs large-scale extortion schemes. Members telephone or text wealthy individuals such as traders, contractors, politicians, and government officials, threatening them with the group's wrath if they do not provide specific

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<sup>172</sup> Tinti, "Contextualizing Boko Haram," 2014.

<sup>173</sup> International Crisis Group, "Curbing violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency," 2014.

<sup>174</sup> Forest, "Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria," 2012.

<sup>175</sup> The payment of membership dues was initially the basic source of funding for the sect. Before Mohammed Yusuf was killed, members had to pay a daily levy of 100 naira to their leader.

<sup>176</sup> "Curbing violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency," International Crisis Group, Africa Report No. 216, 3 April 2014; Akinola Olojo, "Nigeria's Troubled North: Interrogating the Drivers of Public Support for Boko Haram," ICCT Research Paper, International Center for Counterterrorism- The Hague, October 2013.

<sup>177</sup> There have been several dozen bank robberies attributed to Boko Haram since 2011. The group claims it is permitted to do this by the Quran, as the money it takes is considered to be the "spoils of war." Authorities warn that criminal groups may also be opportunistically posing as Boko Haram militants.

<sup>178</sup> Blanchard, "Nigeria's Boko Haram," CRS Report for Congress, 2014.

sums of money to enable the group to carry out jihad.<sup>179</sup> Boko Haram also extorts money from ordinary residents of areas it controls, as well as from persons whom they have intimidated into paying protection fees.<sup>180</sup> Increasingly, Boko Haram has been obtaining most of its funding through kidnap for ransom. The ransoms Boko Haram has collected are estimated to be worth millions of dollars.<sup>181</sup>

To a lesser extent, Boko Haram also receives foreign donations, including those from terrorist organizations.<sup>182</sup> In recent years, investigations into money transfers have led to members of the Nigerian diaspora living in Pakistan, Europe, and the United States.<sup>183</sup> Boko Haram has also intercepted charity funds headed into Nigeria—for example, those generated by the UK-based aid organization Al-Muntada Al-Islami Trust.<sup>184</sup> According to the U.S. Treasury Department, there is evidence that Boko Haram has also received small amounts of funding from AQIM. The estimated value of financial transfers from AQIM is in the low hundreds of thousands.<sup>185</sup> Most analysts agree that funding from AQIM is very limited and inconsequential relative to the overall funding that Boko Haram gets through its criminal activities.<sup>186</sup>

Boko Haram appears to manage its funds largely outside the banking system. It uses a system of couriers to transfer cash inside Nigeria and across the border to neighboring countries.<sup>187</sup>

## Internal support

To ensure its long-term viability, an insurgency needs not only a functioning organization, an ideology, and resources, but also the support of a local population.

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<sup>179</sup> International Crisis Group, “Curbing violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency,” 2014.

<sup>180</sup> Onuoha, “Why Do Youth Join Boko Haram?” 2014.

<sup>181</sup> Phil Stewart and Lesley Wroughton. “How Boko Haram is beating U.S. efforts to choke its financing.” *Reuters*, July 1, 2014. Accessed July 15, 2014 from [www.reuters.com/assets/print?aid=USKBN0F636020140701](http://www.reuters.com/assets/print?aid=USKBN0F636020140701).

<sup>182</sup> Peter Tinti, “Contextualizing Boko Haram,” Beacon, online, 21 April 2014, accessed on 16 June 2014 at <https://www.beaconreader.com/peter-tinti/contextualizing-boko-haram>; Jacob Zenn, “Boko Haram and the Kidnapping of the Chibok Schoolgirls,” *CTC Sentinel*, 7; 5 (2014): 1-8. Accessed on 20 June 2014 at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/boko-haram-and-the-kidnapping-of-the-chibok-schoolgirls>.

<sup>183</sup> Forest, “Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria,” 2012.

<sup>184</sup> Olojo, “Nigeria’s Troubled North,” 2013.

<sup>185</sup> Phil Stewart and Lesley Wroughton, “How Boko Haram is beating U.S. efforts to choke its financing,” 2014.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

An insurgent organization requires a consistent recruitment base and a reliable and hospitable safe haven from which to plan and carry out operations.<sup>188</sup>

Prior to 2009, when it was still seen as a quasi-legitimate group, Boko Haram could claim true and significant grassroots support.<sup>189</sup> Under Mohammed Yusuf, Boko Haram was able to tap into grievances over widespread poverty, government corruption, and ethno-religious competition for political power. Support for the group was also secured through Yusuf's distribution of welfare and jobs to unemployed youths who became members of his group.<sup>190</sup>

During its early years, Boko Haram had ties to and received support from local northern politicians and elites.<sup>191</sup> Political actors, who at one or another period associated themselves with Boko Haram's leadership, capitalized on the ability of the group to mobilize broad support from its members. Evidence of popular (and political) support for Yusuf was reflected in his position as a Borno State representative in Nigeria's Supreme Council of Sharia.<sup>192</sup>

Today, Boko Haram receives extraordinarily little support from the masses in northern Nigerian. According to one recent U.S. government survey, only 5 percent of the population in the north professed support for the group.<sup>193</sup> The loss of public support is evidenced by the increasing frustration and resentment of many Nigerians against the group's violent and destructive activities and by the standup of community self-defense groups. What little active support the group does receive from the public is likely coerced. That said, fundamentalist rejectionist ideology still resonates strongly with a large segment of the northern population (nearly 20 percent).<sup>194</sup> Many northern Muslims continue to share the movement's desire for stricter implementation of Sharia, or even for an Islamic state, and its hostility to federal authorities. The vast majority no longer believe that democracy, human rights, and a market economy offer a way out.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Pérouse de Montclos, *Boko Haram*, 2014.

<sup>189</sup> Author's interview, Jacob Zenn, Jamestown Foundation, phone interview, 16 July 2014.

<sup>190</sup> Olojo, "Nigeria's Troubled North," 2013.

<sup>191</sup> Author's interview, Jacob Zenn, Jamestown Foundation, phone interview, 16 July 2014.; Akinola Olojo, "Nigeria's Troubled North: Interrogating the Drivers of Public Support for Boko Haram," ICCT Research Paper, International Center for Counterterrorism- The Hague, October 2013.

<sup>192</sup> Olojo, "Nigeria's Troubled North," 2013.

<sup>193</sup> Author's interviews, U.S. Government officials, Washington, DC, 22 July 2014.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>195</sup> Pérouse de Montclos, *Boko Haram*, 2014.

It is important to note that Boko Haram has also found virtually no support among northern elites, including traditional rulers and tribal leaders from the Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups. Perhaps the perceived dominance of the Kanuri within Boko Haram is an important reason for this.<sup>196</sup> Any political support the group may have been receiving has also dried up. The Nigerian government's criminalization of the group seems to have diminished the appeal of the group within political circles.<sup>197</sup> According to some U.S. analysts, claims of continued support from political elites are most likely a means to neutralize opposition within the context of state politics.<sup>198</sup>

## Recruitment

As stated previously, most of Boko Haram's members come from the Kanuri ethnic group.<sup>199</sup> Today, most recruitment is still done through the networks of Kanuri families, friends, and business acquaintances.<sup>200</sup> Religious leaders from Borno recruit members of the Kanuri population, even outside of Nigeria's borders, using persuasion and financial inducements.<sup>201</sup> Boko Haram uses the Kanuri empire narrative and the group's relative disenfranchisement as a recruiting narrative.

Boko Haram's ideology does resonate among many, including frustrated university graduates who find that their aspirations cannot be met by the system currently in place.<sup>202</sup> The ongoing violence and abuse by government forces may also be driving new recruits to join Boko Haram.<sup>203</sup> Potential members are also attracted to the group by the bravado which many Boko Haram members have displayed against the government security forces.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Forest, "Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria," 2012.

<sup>197</sup> Olojo, "Nigeria's Troubled North," 2013.

<sup>198</sup> Author's interviews, U.S. Government officials, Washington, DC, 22 July 2014.

<sup>199</sup> A typical Kanuri from the northern border regions is likely to have minimal identity as a Nigerian given their distance from the capital, the lack of government presence, and their strong relations with Kanuri communities in Niger, Cameroon, and Chad. See: The Soufan Group IntelBrief, "Boko Haram's Local Foreign Fighters, November 13, 2013. Accessed on 25 August 2014 at <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-boko-harams-local-foreign-fighters/>.

<sup>200</sup> Author's interview, Atta Barkindo, Ph.D. candidate, SOAS University of London, phone interview, 25 July 2014; Author's interview, Jacob Zenn, Jamestown Foundation, phone interview, 16 July 2014.

<sup>201</sup> Zenn, "Boko Haram and the Kidnapping of the Chibok Schoolgirls," 2014.

<sup>202</sup> Forest, "Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria," 2012.

<sup>203</sup> Tinti, "Contextualizing Boko Haram," 2014.

<sup>204</sup> International Crisis Group, "Northern Nigeria: Background to Conflict," 2010.

At the individual level, surveys, interviews, and focus groups conducted in Nigeria suggest that poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and weak family structures make, or contribute to making, young men vulnerable to radicalization. Itinerant preachers capitalize on the situation by preaching an extreme version of religious teachings and conveying a narrative of the government as weak and corrupt.<sup>205</sup>

While estimates of Boko Haram's recruitment of child soldiers vary, many Nigeria observers are concerned about the vulnerability of the North's *almajiri* population—destitute youth who leave their homes and take up residency in madrassas and act as beggars. A study conducted by the Ministerial Committee on Almajiri Education in 2010 revealed that there are 9.5 million *almajiris* in Nigeria, over 70 percent of who live in northern Nigeria under desperate conditions.<sup>206</sup>

As its popularity has declined, Boko Haram has increasingly relied on forced recruitment and criminality to fill its ranks.<sup>207</sup> Boko Haram reportedly has resorted to forced conscription of young men and recruiting of criminals, breaking them out of jail or paying them to conduct attacks.<sup>208</sup> Some members join because Boko Haram pays them to kill Nigerian government officials, steal cars, or rob banks.<sup>209</sup> Immigrants from neighboring countries may also be joining the group for economic reasons.<sup>210</sup>

## External support

Much has been written about external support to Boko Haram from foreign terrorist organizations. In the last several years, the group's tactics have grown increasingly sophisticated, leading many to speculate that it is receiving training and material support from like-minded Jihadi militant groups in Niger, Mali, the broader Sahel, and Somalia.<sup>211</sup> In particular, they cite the speed at which the group developed the

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<sup>205</sup> Onuoha, "Why Do Youth Join Boko Haram?" 2014.

<sup>206</sup> Pérouse de Montclos, *Boko Haram*, 2014.

<sup>207</sup> Author's interviews, U.S. Government officials, Washington, DC, 22 July 2014.

<sup>208</sup> International Crisis Group, "Curbing violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency," 2014.

<sup>209</sup> Zenn, "Boko Haram's Dangerous Expansion into Northwest Nigeria," 2012.

<sup>210</sup> Jacob Zenn. "Boko Haram Recruitment Strategies," Council on Foreign Relations Blog, online, 16 April 2013, accessed on 24 June 2014 at <http://blogs.cfr.org/campbell/2013/04/16/boko-haram-recruitment-strategies/>.

<sup>211</sup> Peter Tinti, "Contextualizing Boko Haram," Beacon, online, 21 April 2014, accessed on 16 June 2014 at <https://www.beaconreader.com/peter-tinti/contextualizing-boko-haram>; James J.F. Forest, "Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria," JSOU Report 12-5, Joint Special Operations University, May 2012.

capability to produce effective improvised explosive devices and enlist suicide bombers.<sup>212</sup> Reports of these possible connections have bolstered the Nigerian government's argument that the violence in the northeast is not a localized conflict with roots in local grievances but instead is part of a regional and even global terrorism problem.

According to Terence McCulley, the U.S. ambassador to Nigeria in 2011, several hundred Boko Haram members have traveled to Mali to receive bomb-making and propaganda training from AQIM.<sup>213</sup> A Nigerian intelligence report from May 2012 suggested that Boko Haram received training and money from AQIM to kidnap foreigners in Nigeria.<sup>214</sup> U.S. Africa Command officials have referenced indications that the two groups "are likely sharing funds, training, and explosive materials."<sup>215</sup> In 2012, the United States designated several Boko Haram leaders (Abubakar Shekau, Khalid al-Barnawi, and Abubakar Adam Kamar) as global terrorists with close ties to AQIM.<sup>216</sup> And in May 2014, the United Nations Security Council added Boko Haram to its list of designated al-Qaeda entities.

Despite these reports and designations, many analysts and Nigeria watchers question the veracity of these connections and doubt that, apart from some limited training and funding, Boko Haram receives any significant external support or maintains close relationships with foreign Jihadi groups.<sup>217</sup> According to one U.S. government report from 2012, while the group's leaders have expressed rhetorical solidarity with Al Qaeda and others in public statements, there is no hard evidence of direct organizational or operational links.<sup>218</sup>

## Sanctuary

Boko Haram fighters use remote border areas in Borno state as a refuge from Nigerian government offensives.<sup>219</sup> Boko Haram has also reportedly established rear

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<sup>212</sup> Walker, "What is Boko Haram?" 2012.

<sup>213</sup> Perry, "Boko Haram: Terror's Insidious New Face," 2014.

<sup>214</sup> Zenn, "Boko Haram's Dangerous Expansion into Northwest Nigeria," 2012.

<sup>215</sup> Ploch, "Nigeria: Current Issues and U.S. Policy," CRS Report for Congress, 2013.

<sup>216</sup> Olojo, "Nigeria's Troubled North," 2013.

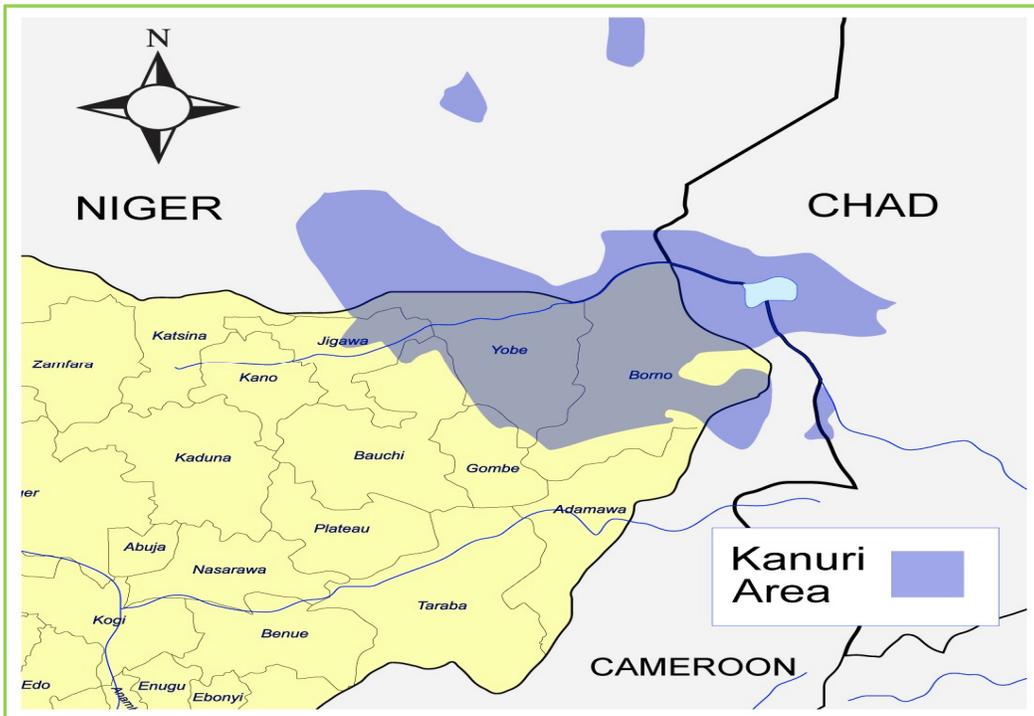
<sup>217</sup> Author's interviews, U.S. Government officials, Washington, DC, 22 July 2014; Phil Stewart and Lesley Wroughton, "How Boko Haram is beating U.S. efforts to choke its financing," *Reuters*, July 1, 2014. Accessed July 15, 2014 from [www.reuters.com/assets/print?aid=USKBN0F636020140701](http://www.reuters.com/assets/print?aid=USKBN0F636020140701).

<sup>218</sup> Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, *Politics by Other Means: Nigeria Conflict Assessment*, 2012.

<sup>219</sup> Zenn, "Boko Haram and the Kidnapping of the Chibok Schoolgirls," 2014.

bases in Kanuri areas in southern Niger, western Chad, and northern Cameroon, and takes advantage of the long, porous borders to move between them.<sup>220</sup> According to one source, Boko Haram’s leader, Abubakar Shekau, travels frequently to Niger and Cameroon through Kanuri-dominated areas<sup>221</sup> (see Figure 4). These sanctuaries have enabled Boko Haram’s leaders to plan, prepare, and recuperate in relative safety.

Figure 4. Kanuri areas in Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon



Source: Michael Markowitz, CNA

<sup>220</sup> Contextualizing Boko Haram, Peter Tinti; Akinola Olojo, “Nigeria’s Troubled North: Interrogating the Drivers of Public Support for Boko Haram,” ICCT Research Paper, International Center for Counterterrorism- The Hague, October 2013; “Curbing violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency,” International Crisis Group, Africa Report No. 216, 3 April 2014.

<sup>221</sup> International Crisis Group, “Curbing violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency,” 2014.

## Cohesion

An area of debate among Nigeria watchers is Boko Haram's cohesion and unity. In recent years it has become increasingly evident that the group comprises various semi-autonomous factions. While they may not be unified operationally on a day-to-day basis, they do seem to have a clear leadership structure, and do come together to conduct large-scale operations.<sup>222</sup>

Because of its many factions and divisive leadership, Boko Haram may be susceptible to fracturing. As an organization, Boko Haram is so diffuse that all not associated fighters follow its Salafi ideology and doctrine.<sup>223</sup> Moreover, Shekau's reported favoritism towards ethnic Kanuris of Borno has driven Hausas, non-Nigerians, and other non-Kanuris away from the core group.

Disagreement over assassinations of Muslim leaders, mass casualty attacks that kill Muslim civilians, and negotiations with the government have also contributed to the emergence of splinter groups.<sup>224</sup> In 2012, a splinter group calling itself Ansaru released flyers in Kano announcing its "public formation" and saying it was a "humane" alternative to Boko Haram.<sup>225</sup> Ansaru was critical of Boko Haram's killing of Nigerian Muslims and instead focused its attacks on foreigners.<sup>226</sup> In addition, Ansaru proclaimed a more regional focus, billing itself the defender of Islam in all of West Africa.<sup>227</sup> Today it appears that Ansaru either is no longer active or has rejoined Boko Haram and is no longer claiming attacks under its own name.<sup>228</sup>

## The Nigerian government

A government's political inclusiveness, its legitimacy, its overall strategy, and, in particular, the way it employs force are all important predictors of success in counterinsurgency.<sup>229</sup> Governments are not all equally capable of using well-established counterinsurgency principles to deal with groups such as Nigeria's Boko

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<sup>222</sup> Author's interviews, U.S. Government officials, Washington, DC, 22 July 2014.

<sup>223</sup> Mohammed Aly Sergie and Toni Johnson, "Boko Haram," 2014.

<sup>224</sup> Olojo, "Nigeria's Troubled North," 2013.

<sup>225</sup> Zenn, "Leadership Analysis of Boko Haram and Ansaru in Nigeria," 2014.

<sup>226</sup> Ploch, "Nigeria: Current Issues and U.S. Policy," CRS Report for Congress, 2013.

<sup>227</sup> Pérouse de Montclos, *Boko Haram*, 2014.

<sup>228</sup> Author's interviews, U.S. Government officials, Washington, DC, 22 July 2014.

<sup>229</sup> Stephen Watts, Jason H. Campbell, Patrick B. Johnston, Sameer Lalwani, and Sarah H. Bana. "Countering Others Insurgencies: Understanding US Small Footprint Interventions in Local Context." RAND Corporation, 2014.

Haram. Therefore, before offering assistance to a government under insurgent threat, it is crucial that outside parties understand various characteristics of the counterinsurgent regime. What follows is a brief encapsulation of the Nigerian government's capabilities and methods, its relationship with the affected population, and the role it may play in perpetuating the insurgency in the northeast. The discussion in this section will be expanded, and more details will be given, in a subsequent chapter of this study that focuses on the Nigerian government's capacity, capability, and limitations in regard to combating Boko Haram.

## The government's approach to dealing with Boko Haram

From Boko Haram's near destruction in 2009 until its explosion onto the international stage in 2013, the Nigerian government considered the group merely an embarrassment and a nuisance relegated to the northeast. Consequently, its approach to dealing with the group initially consisted largely of a public relations campaign.<sup>230</sup> A series of high-profile bombings and kidnappings, as well as international pressure, forced the government to begin dealing with the group in a more concerted manner.

Today, the government's narrative is that the group is part of an international terrorist network. According to a Nigerian military spokesman: "Here they call it Boko Haram, but Boko Haram is totally al-Qaeda. The name does not matter."<sup>231</sup> Thus, its approach to combating the group has for the most part focused on kinetic military operations designed to kill and capture its fighters and occasional haphazard attempts at negotiations. However, many Nigeria watchers agree that the government, by making no meaningful efforts to provide local security or address root causes of the conflict, has failed to develop a coherent strategy for resolving the conflict.

In May 2013, President Goodluck Jonathan declared a state of emergency in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe States, and flooded the area with security personnel.<sup>232</sup> In order to hunt down Boko Haram members, the government created the Joint Task Force (JTF), a unit of approximately 8,000 soldiers, police, and other security personnel, supported by fighter jets and helicopter gunships.<sup>233</sup> While the JTF initially succeeded in killing hundreds of Boko Haram militants and sympathizers, and has

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<sup>230</sup> Author's interviews, U.S. Government officials, Washington, DC, 22 July 2014.

<sup>231</sup> Perry, "Boko Haram: Terror's Insidious New Face," 2014.

<sup>232</sup> Sodipo, "Mitigating Radicalism in Northern Nigeria," 2013.

<sup>233</sup> Tinti, "Contextualizing Boko Haram," 2014.

pushed them out of major urban centers, the Boko Haram group has proven to be highly resilient and, at the time of this writing, has managed to expand its attacks.

Amid the questionable results of the military crackdown, the Nigerian government has, on various occasions, attempted to open a dialogue with the group. President Goodluck Jonathan has shown intermittent interest in a negotiated resolution of the insurgency. The Presidential Committee on Dialogue and Peaceful Resolution of Security Challenges in the North, started in April 2013, is the administration's latest foray.<sup>234</sup> Most Nigeria watchers do not believe that negotiations with Boko Haram's current leadership are a realistic option, as many of their demands—such as the division of Nigeria into two states, the establishment of an Islamic state (including in Christian areas), and the conversion of President Jonathan to Islam—are non-starters. Second, it is unclear whether Boko Haram is sufficiently unified to negotiate as a whole. According to media reports, in 2011 and 2012 the group murdered its own members who attempted to enter into negotiations with the government.<sup>235</sup>

Some officials in the Nigerian government understand that a more comprehensive and population-centric strategy will be necessary in order to defeat Boko Haram and reduce support for anti-government groups in the northeast. For instance, in March 2014, National Security Adviser Mohammed Sambo Dasuki announced a new “soft” approach to dealing with the root causes of terrorism in Nigeria. However, to date, the government's half-hearted efforts to address northern grievances have made little progress. Tellingly, those officials in the north who have attempted to increase education and employment opportunities have received almost no support from the federal government.<sup>236</sup>

## Government tactics

As previously stated, to date, the government's approach to dealing with Boko Haram has been largely kinetic in nature. According to media reporting, the government's tactics against Boko Haram include roadblocks and checkpoints, cordon and search operations, raids on suspected hideouts, retaliation on suspected Boko Haram sympathizers and their property, mass arrests, and, most recently, the co-option of local, non-statutory, self-defense militias.

In large part, government tactics have been heavy handed and have resulted in significant collateral damage and abuse of civilians. During raids, the police and

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<sup>234</sup> Alex Thurston. “Nigeria: Ephemeral Peace.” *The Revealer*, online, 22 July 2013, accessed on 24 July 2014 at <http://therevealer.org/archives/18029>.

<sup>235</sup> Walker, “What is Boko Haram?” 2012.

<sup>236</sup> U.S. Department of State. *Country Reports on Terrorism 2013*. April 2014.

army descend on suspected hideouts with guns blazing, sometimes killing innocent bystanders in the crossfire. At the site of Boko Haram attacks, the police round up as many people they can, often with little or no evidence.<sup>237</sup> An unknown number of people have disappeared, presumed executed by the police. The roadblocks which have been set up to prevent Boko Haram movements have instead often been used by police to extract bribes. On several occasions the government has also confiscated the property of suspects.<sup>238</sup>

Today, most Nigeria observers agree that the tactics employed by the government against Boko Haram have been counterproductive, have fueled the conflict, and have further alienated the northeastern population on which it depends on for information on the enemy. It is possible that the prior success of such heavy-handed tactics against Islamic revolts like the Maitatsine movement of the 1980s has given the government the false idea that Boko Haram can be defeated with similar methods.<sup>239</sup>

## Military capabilities

On paper, Nigeria possesses one of Africa's strongest militaries. It has a security budget totaling almost \$5.8 billion, a sizable air force, and a standing army of 130,000 troops.<sup>240</sup> Despite this seemingly formidable array of forces, the Nigerian military has struggled to respond to the threat posed by Boko Haram. Recently, the military's feeble response to the April 2014 abduction of 300 girls by Boko Haram vividly showcased its lack of capability to both domestic and international audiences.

According to U.S. government assessments, Nigerian troops are not adequately resourced or equipped to counter the insurgency.<sup>241</sup> Soldiers on the front lines complain that they don't receive sufficient logistical support and that they are not being paid in a timely manner. Their equipment is insufficient, and much of what they do have has fallen into disrepair. For example, drones which could be used to track the group (purchased from Israel in 2006) have been grounded due to improper maintenance.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Walker, "What is Boko Haram?" 2012.

<sup>238</sup> Tinti, "Contextualizing Boko Haram," 2014.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Blanchard, "Nigeria's Boko Haram," CRS Report for Congress, 2014.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

<sup>242</sup> Naunihal Singh. "How to Bring Back the Nigerian Schoolgirls, Three Months On." *New Yorker*, July 10, 2014.

Soldiers serving in the northeast also reportedly suffer from low morale, in some part due to the regular attacks on their barracks and other security facilities.<sup>243</sup> According to a U.S. Department of Defense assessment, Nigerian troops are “showing signs of real fear,” and becoming “afraid to even engage.”<sup>244</sup> Frustration has reached such a level that soldiers in the Seventh Division recently opened fire on their commanding officer after twelve of their comrades were killed in an ambush.<sup>245</sup>

Of special note, the government’s ability to collect intelligence—crucial in fighting clandestine groups such as Boko Haram—appears to be woefully inadequate for conducting effective operations or protecting its forces in the field.<sup>246</sup> Most Nigeria watchers believe this is largely due to the lack of cooperation between security forces and the local Muslim population, resulting from the people’s immense distrust of the government as well as their intense fear of insurgent reprisals.<sup>247</sup>

A number of structural factors have also reduced the Nigerian security force’s ability to effectively combat Boko Haram. According to a U.S. State Department report, dynamics limiting the government’s response include: a lack of coordination and cooperation between security agencies; corruption; misallocation of resources; limited requisite databases; the slow pace of the judicial system; and lack of sufficient training for prosecutors and judges to implement anti-terrorism laws.<sup>248</sup> The government of Nigeria has pursued efforts in more recent years to work with regional partners Chad, Niger, and Cameroon, particularly on border security initiatives. There has been increasing cooperation since the spring of 2014, and international partners, the United States included, have emphasized the importance of regional coordination in their efforts to provide Nigeria with assistance.

## Government “conflict interests”

While somewhat counterintuitive, some commentators speculate that certain elements within the Nigerian government have perverse monetary and political incentives to allow Boko Haram to continue to operate in the north.<sup>249</sup> For example, leaders in each of the 36 states of Nigeria receive up to 715 million naira (\$4.5

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<sup>243</sup> Oarhe Osumah. “Boko Haram Insurgency in Northern Nigeria and the Vicious Cycle of Internal Security.” *Small wars & Insurgencies*, January 2013.

<sup>244</sup> Blanchard, “Nigeria’s Boko Haram,” CRS Report for Congress, 2014.

<sup>245</sup> Singh, “How to Bring Back the Nigerian Schoolgirls, Three Months On,” 2014.

<sup>246</sup> Forest, “Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria,” 2012.

<sup>247</sup> Solomon, “Counter-terrorism in Nigeria: Responding to Boko Haram,” 2012.

<sup>248</sup> U.S. Department of State. *Country Reports on Terrorism 2013*. April 2014.

<sup>249</sup> Tinti, “Contextualizing Boko Haram,” 2014.

million) per month as a “security fund,” much of which is funneled into personal bank accounts.<sup>250</sup> The military has also been accused of dragging out the conflict in order to continue receiving large budgets. Some analysts argue that this money remains in the hands of military officials or has been distributed among security contractors.<sup>251</sup>

In addition, while they no longer maintain close ties, northern elites, including local government officials, are thought to manipulate Boko Haram, or at least exploit the situation to their political advantage.<sup>252</sup> In January 2012, President Jonathan announced that Boko Haram had infiltrated the highest levels of politics and the military, and accused northern politicians of using the group to bring down his government.<sup>253</sup> In similar cases, politicians have accused their rivals of being affiliated with or funding Boko Haram as a pretext for score settling.<sup>254</sup> Some analysts have even speculated that President Jonathan will allow Boko Haram to wreak havoc in order to prevent millions of northerners from voting in the 2015 election, thereby guaranteeing his re-election.<sup>255</sup>

## Traditional leaders and civil society

In addition to state and local governments, the population of Nigeria’s northeast relies on a number of traditional leaders, customary institutions, and self-help groups to promote community interests, resolve disputes, and provide social services (including security). Some of the more important informal actors include religious leaders, traditional rulers, civil society organizations, and community self-defense groups.

In some cases, these actors are perceived as having more legitimacy than the government, and, therefore, they can, under certain circumstances, wield significant influence in their communities.<sup>256</sup> Some Nigeria watchers believe these actors have an

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<sup>250</sup> Forest, “Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria,” 2012.

<sup>251</sup> Hoffman, “Who Speaks for the North? Politics and Influence in Northern Nigeria,” 2014.

<sup>252</sup> Author’s interview, Jacob Zenn, Jamestown Foundation, phone interview, 16 July 2014.

<sup>253</sup> Walker, “What is Boko Haram?” 2012.

<sup>254</sup> Peter Tinti, “Contextualizing Boko Haram,” Beacon, online, 21 April 2014, accessed on 16 June 2014 at <https://www.beaconreader.com/peter-tinti/contextualizing-boko-haram>; Andrew Walker, “What is Boko Haram?” Special Report, US Institute of Peace, June 2012.

<sup>255</sup> International Crisis Group, “Curbing violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency,” 2014.

<sup>256</sup> While some of these actors maintain considerable legitimacy, others have lost influence due to their connections with the national government. And while many of these actors promote

important role to play in confronting the threat of violent extremist groups.<sup>257</sup> Yet, because of their influence, these informal actors have been among the top targets of Boko Haram. Many have been assassinated or have been silenced through intimidation.

## Religious leaders and organizations

Some of the most influential figures in Nigeria's Muslim north are religious leaders known as emirs. Emirs exert a great deal of political influence as the titular rulers of local religious communities. They draw authority from their historical influence in social and political life as well as their role as trusted conflict mediators. Some emirs have strong ties to the government, which pays them a stipend.<sup>258</sup> Government officials will turn to popular emirs to legitimize political plans and to gain some of their popularity by association.<sup>259</sup> The current Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar, is considered the overall leader of Nigerian Muslims and carries the title of president general of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs.<sup>260</sup>

There have are several religious organizations and movements which have operated in the north at one time or another. One of the best-known and influential organizations was the *Izalatul Bidi'a wa Ikhramatis Sunnah* (People Committed to the Removal of Innovations in Islam), or Izala for short. Founded in 1978 by Sheikh Ismaila Idris, Izala was a reformist movement influenced by Wahhabism with ties to Saudi Arabia. At one point it ran a charity and first aid organization. Though Izala went into decline after a split of the leadership in the 1990s, its reformist ideas still have support in many sections of society, and its former members have gained positions of power and influence in several states.<sup>261</sup>

Similarly, the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (an offshoot of the Muslim Students' Society and a Nigerian version of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood) also runs schools and

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peacebuilding, it is important to remember that others may be contributing to insecurity and conflict by inflaming social and political fissures.

<sup>257</sup> Forest, "Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria," 2012.

<sup>258</sup> Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, *Politics by Other Means: Nigeria Conflict Assessment*, 2012.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>260</sup> James J.F. Forest, "Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria," JSOU Report 12-5, Joint Special Operations University, May 2012; *Politics by Other Means: Nigeria Conflict Assessment*, Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, USAID, August 2012.

<sup>261</sup> International Crisis Group, "Curbing violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency," 2014.

clinics and publishes newspapers.<sup>262</sup> A somewhat more radical group, it was inspired by the Iranian revolution and founded by Sheikh Ibrahim Al-Zakzaky. Its objective is the establishment of an Islamic state in Nigeria and the removal of the secular Nigerian government and its northern elites, which the group considers to be a corrupt affront to Islam.<sup>263</sup>

Aware of the threat that Boko Haram presents (both to the population and to the northern elites themselves), many established Muslim rulers, such as the Sultan of Sokoto, have been vocal opponents of the group.<sup>264</sup> A number of lesser leaders have also spoken against Boko Haram's objectives and actions.<sup>265</sup> In their rejection of extremism, many religious leaders are closely aligned with the political establishment. Nigeria's national security adviser has worked with emirs, Islamic scholars, and moderate Salafists to help establish dialogue and attempt to broker ceasefires.<sup>266</sup>

Unfortunately, it appears that the close relationship between religious leaders and corrupt northern officials over the last 30 years has damaged the legitimacy of the Nigerian Islamic establishment. Moreover, while the emirs and the Sufis remain somewhat influential, they now compete with a number of reformist and fundamentalist alternatives.<sup>267</sup>

## Traditional rulers

Another influential customary institution in Nigeria is the local traditional ruler. Traditional rulers are hereditary community leaders with titles such as Oba, Sarki, Shehu, Mai, and Lamido.<sup>268</sup> Their duties include representing their community's interests by participating in elder councils and acting as intermediaries with the state government. They are also able to exert their personal authority to mitigate conflicts and resolve disputes when violence breaks out within their communities.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> Forest, "Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria," 2012.

<sup>263</sup> Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, *Politics by Other Means: Nigeria Conflict Assessment*, 2012.

<sup>264</sup> Thurston, "Nigeria: Ephemeral Peace," 2013.

<sup>265</sup> Olojo, "Nigeria's Troubled North," 2013.

<sup>266</sup> Zenn, "Boko Haram's Dangerous Expansion into Northwest Nigeria," 2012.

<sup>267</sup> Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, *Politics by Other Means: Nigeria Conflict Assessment*, 2012.

<sup>268</sup> Forest, "Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria," 2012.

<sup>269</sup> Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, *Politics by Other Means: Nigeria Conflict Assessment*, 2012.

Some Nigeria watchers consider the role of traditional rulers in conflict prevention and mediation, like that of religious leaders, to be a potentially important tool in countering violent extremism. In partnership with government officials, traditional rulers can assist in preventing radicalization of communities by helping identify and address local grievances.<sup>270</sup> However, many of these rulers have their own agendas and self-interests, and can accentuate conflict by reinforcing long-standing patronage relationships. Moreover, they have a difficult time supporting a government that is largely seen in the north as illegitimate; if they perceive that such a partnership would lead to significant risks, or would negatively impact their own agendas, gaining their cooperation will be exceedingly difficult.<sup>271</sup>

## Civil society organizations

In addition to religious leaders and traditional rulers, there are a number of community-based NGOs (non-governmental organizations) that also play a prominent role in the lives of ordinary Nigerians. Some, such as the Center for Environment, Human Rights and Development, investigate conflicts in rural areas and work to bring public and government attention to cases of human rights.<sup>272</sup> In the north, the Northern Elders Forum, the Borno Elites for Peace, Progress, and Stability, the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs, the Arewa Youth Forum, and the Northern Christian Elders Forum are actively representing and advocating for the interests of their constituents.<sup>273</sup> The Arewa Research and Development Project, a network of northern-based academics, provides research that will influence decision-making processes in the north.<sup>274</sup>

Other groups promote the development and education of youth. *Fadas*, informal associations of young people, are widespread and provide an outlet for the expression of grievances and a positive mechanism for collective action. The Peace Club, a project of the Peace Initiative Network, aims to promote tolerance, dialogue, and understanding through education and team sports among youth from diverse ethno-religious communities.<sup>275</sup>

In addition, there are a number of foreign NGOs in Nigeria, such as the Search for Common Ground and the Interfaith Mediation Center, that are now considering

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<sup>270</sup> Forest, "Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria," 2012.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> Thurston, "Nigeria: Ephemeral Peace," 2013.

<sup>274</sup> Hoffman, "Who Speaks for the North? Politics and Influence in Northern Nigeria," 2014.

<sup>275</sup> Forest, "Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria," 2012.

expanding their focus to include civil society engagement in the northeast.<sup>276</sup> However, for the time being, NGO presence in northeast Nigeria is very limited relative to other parts of the country.

## Community self-defense groups

With the failure of Nigeria's security forces to dampen the violence in the north, an ever-increasing number of militias and self-help groups are being mobilized for self-defense. In 2013, for example, a number of communities formed vigilante groups composed of young men to protect themselves against Boko Haram. In Borno State, these groups are now working with the state security forces to protect their neighborhoods and villages and to reduce instances of collateral damage and civilian deaths during military operations.<sup>277</sup> Media reports suggest that the groups, which collectively call themselves the "Civilian Joint Task Force" or Civilian-JTF (CJTF), have had some success in improving security in the capital city of Maiduguri.

According to press reports, these volunteers now outnumber government soldiers. Their role has expanded beyond static local defense to include intelligence gathering, surveillance and tracking, and raids on homes of known and suspected members. Under the supervision of the Nigerian military, volunteers have been given identification cards and have been organized into units under the control of JTF neighborhood sector commands. Although the vigilantes are volunteers, they now receive a state stipend, and the JTF pays for treatment of injuries sustained in encounters with Boko Haram and gives financial assistance to the families of those killed in action. The state government has begun a skills program to ensure that these young men have the ability to transition to regular employment—as something other than as fighters—after they leave the CJTF.<sup>278</sup>

While the CJTF has won praise for helping drive Boko Haram cells out of Maiduguri, reports have surfaced which highlight the dangers of tolerating or utilizing poorly trained, non-statutory groups as part of military operations. First, CJTF personnel have proven vulnerable to Boko Haram's retaliatory strikes in the more rural areas. The vigilantes' operations have also provoked increased insurgent reprisal attacks on communities that cooperate with or house the CJTFG.

Second, some residents have complained that the CJTF has harassed motorists at checkpoints and has committed human rights abuses. Some communities fear that

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<sup>276</sup> Author's interview, U.S. Government officials, Washington, DC, 29 July 2014.

<sup>277</sup> Blanchard, "Nigeria's Boko Haram," CRS Report for Congress, 2014.

<sup>278</sup> International Crisis Group, "Curbing violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency," 2014.

the vigilantes could eventually become another source of insecurity. Others fear they could be co-opted by politicians and used for political purposes in the 2015 elections. Already they have acted out against certain politicians they felt were aligned with Boko Haram. For example, they attacked the residence of the Borno state All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP) chairman, Alhaji Mala Othman, in July 2013; because they alleged that he is a sponsor of Boko Haram.<sup>279</sup>

## Nigeria's neighbors

Despite the fact that the bulk of Boko Haram's activities are concentrated in Nigeria, the group affects (and even operates in) other countries as well. Specifically, Chad, Cameroon and Niger (all of which share a border with Nigeria) have a stake in ending the conflict. To this end, each country has participated in counter-Boko Haram activities, ranging from promoting peace talks to deploying troops to the border region. These activities have in some cases been coordinated with the Nigerian Government and in others been independent initiatives by the countries. The President of Chad, Idriss Deby, was personally involved in negotiating the recent cease-fire between Boko Haram and the Nigerian Government, although his motives in doing so have been questioned.<sup>280</sup> Chad also pledged 700 troops for a cross-border force to help counter-Boko Haram in the Lake Chad area.<sup>281</sup> Similarly, Cameroon deployed 1,000 troops from its Rapid Intervention Brigade to the border region in May 2014 "to counter a rising threat from Boko Haram Islamist militants".<sup>282</sup> Niger has increased its patrols and intelligence assets in the southeastern part of the country.<sup>283</sup> It is clear from these efforts that all countries involved are concerned with border security and violence spilling over into their respective territories.

In addition to acting bilaterally, Nigeria's neighbors have worked through regional organizations including the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC). The LCBC created the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in 1998, and its mandate has

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

<sup>280</sup> Emma Farge. "Chad's Deby plays for high stakes in Boko Haram talks." Reuters, 3 November 2014. Accessed 17 November 2014 at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/11/03/us-nigeria-violence-chad-insight-idUSKBN0IN1MG2.0141103>.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

<sup>282</sup> Bate Felix. "Cameroon sends troops to Nigeria border to tackle Boko Haram." Reuters, 27 May 2014. Accessed 17 November 2014 at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/27/us-cameroon-boko-haram-military-idUSKBN0E71T120140527>.

<sup>283</sup> David Lewis. "Niger fears contagion from Nigeria's Boko Haram Islamists." Reuters, 19 March 2014. Accessed 17 November 2014 at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/19/us-niger-bokoharam-insight-idUSBREA2I16720140319>.

since been expanded to include terrorism as an area of focus. The heads of state from the LCBC nations met in October 2014 to discuss security in West Africa. Among the conclusions reached were pledges to improve operational and intelligence capabilities of the MNJTF, deploy MNJTS contingents within national borders and develop a common strategy to fight Boko Haram.<sup>284</sup> In addition to the efforts of the LCBC, ECOWAS has also been successful in coordinating and focusing regional attention on Boko Haram. At its most recent meeting of the Heads of Intelligence and Security Services, ECOWAS called for greater intelligence sharing among member states, as well as increased counterinsurgency (COIN) training.<sup>285</sup> To be sure, not all of these called-for initiatives have been carried out. Despite this, the potential for regional cooperation with lasting results is very real, and is worth exploring further.

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<sup>284</sup> Reuben Abati (Special Adviser on Media and Publicity to President Goodluck Jonathan), Tweets, 7 October 2014, accessed 17 November 2014.

<sup>285</sup> 5th meeting of the Heads of Intelligence and Security Services of the countries of the Sahelo-Saharan region Operational Conclusions. Accessed 17 November 2014 at: <http://www.peaceau.org/en/article/5th-meeting-of-the-heads-of-intelligence-and-security-services-of-the-countries-of-the-sahelo-saharan-region-19-20-may-2014-ouagadougou-burkina-faso>.

## Conflict Diagnosis

In this section we diagnose and categorize the nature of the conflict in northeastern Nigeria. Because conflicts generally evolve in stages, we also analyze where the conflict appears to be in its overall evolution.

Boko Haram is an ethnic-based (Kanuri) revolutionary insurgent group which utilizes subversion, classic guerilla tactics, and terrorism to achieve its goals.<sup>286</sup> Its fundamental objective is to replace the existing political order by overthrowing the secular Nigerian state and replacing it with an Islamic government.<sup>287</sup> It is a product of the local context and conditions, and an extreme manifestation of local identity politics. It is motivated by a variety of social, political, and economic grievances and is organized around a fundamentalist/rejectionist ideology. It is sustained by the state's neglect and counterproductive security measures.<sup>288</sup>

In its current form, Boko Haram is a destabilizing force but does not present an existential threat to the Nigerian government and its security services. Because of its extreme tactics, indiscriminant violence, and unpopular ideology, it currently lacks true grassroots support—although its grievances are shared by many northern Nigerians and its goals resonate with a large percentage of Nigerian Muslims.

Unlike other insurgent groups, such as Afghanistan's Taliban, until now Boko Haram has not attempted to carry out a politically organized insurgency—which, by definition, requires the development of complex political structures in tandem with military operations. Boko Haram does not employ any form of “shadow governance” to control territory (other than very recent attempts to enforce sharia law in villages it has captured); nor does it attempt the political mobilization of the population. Instead, at this stage in the conflict, Boko Haram relies almost exclusively on a military model to achieve its insurgent goals. It began in 2009 as an urban-cellular insurgency which relied primarily on terrorism, and has since morphed into a rural

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<sup>286</sup> The U.S. Department of Defense defines insurgency as “An organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through use of subversion and armed conflict.”

<sup>287</sup> Some analysts argue the conflict is merely a separatist insurgency that wishes to carve out an Islamic state in the north, but does not in actuality have a national agenda. Others argue the group is simply a terrorist organization and or a criminal syndicate. However, taken at face value, Boko Haram's communiques and propaganda suggest larger objects which include the overthrow of the current regime.

<sup>288</sup> Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, USAID. *Nigeria Cross-Sectoral Conflict Assessment*. August 2014.

insurgency that has added guerilla tactics to its repertoire.<sup>289</sup> This type of insurgency is what renowned counterinsurgency scholar David Galula termed the Bourgeois-Nationalist, or “shortcut” pattern. It depends heavily on random acts of terrorism, conducted in spectacular fashion, to get publicity for the movement and to attract latent supporters.<sup>290</sup> Today Boko Haram also uses “enforcement” terror to instill fear in wavering supporters and employs “agitation” terror against representatives of the government and those who support it.

At this stage in the conflict, it appears that Boko Haram’s operational objective is to subvert the northern elites and undermine the government’s legitimacy in order to separate them from the Muslim population. While its long-term strategy is difficult to discern, it is reasonable to assume that Boko Haram believes that its military successes and the resulting weakening and de-legitimization of the government will cause the Muslim population to rally to its cause.

A review of the contextual dynamics and sources of tension identified in previous sections suggests that the conflict is currently being driven by a number of factors. First and foremost is the continued desire of Boko Haram to achieve its objective of regime change, which stems from its aforementioned grievances relating to poor governance and north-south economic disparities. Underlying conditions—including large numbers of unemployed youth, strong Islamic fundamentalist/rejectionist currents in the northeast, ethno-religious tensions, and competition over political power—ensure that Boko Haram can recruit enough new members to stay viable.

It is important to note that the causes and drivers of the conflict have themselves been profoundly reshaped as the conflict has evolved from an incipient insurgency to a full-blown insurrection. Today the conflict is also being perpetuated by the Nigerian government itself, which has responded with a heavy-handed counterterrorism strategy that pays little attention to underlying contextual realities and root causes. The government’s approach has further alienated the already disaffected northeastern communities, which, for the most part, remain hesitant to cooperate with the security forces or provide them with the necessary intelligence required for pin-point, network-centric operations. Because the government is unable to conduct surgical strikes against the insurgents, its operations often result in indiscriminate killings—which expand the pool of potential insurgent recruits and

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<sup>289</sup> Guerrilla tactics are intended not only to wear down the government’s conventional forces, but to provoke them into conducting reprisals against the general population, which they rightly or wrongly perceive as aiding the insurgents.

<sup>290</sup> While this approach may save years of organizational and political work, its weakness lies in that terrorist tactics may backfire by losing any public support it could have hoped to gain. See: David Galula, “Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice,” Praeger Security International, Westport, Connecticut, 1964.

solidify a sense that the government is an equally liable party to the violence. Moreover, despite an increased military presence in the north, the government has been unable to protect the population from Boko Haram attacks and retaliatory raids, and, as a result, has lost a great deal of credibility. Boko Haram retains considerable freedom of movement in the northeast and enjoys access to sanctuaries in the Kanuri-dominated areas of Chad, Niger, and Cameroon.

Lastly, the conflict is being prolonged by the weakness of conflict mitigation institutions in the northeast – such as traditional leaders and civil society organizations – that either have been contaminated by their relationships with the government or have been cowed by Boko Haram’s murder and intimidation campaign. The lack of legitimacy of the Nigerian government, as well as the fractured nature of the Islamic community in the north, has had direct implications for the ability of Nigeria’s non-governmental partners to counter Boko Haram’s radical narrative.

While an increase of attacks and the government’s inappropriate and ineffective response have resulted in a decrease in the state legitimacy, Boko Haram has failed to capitalize. Because of its extreme tactics and the indiscriminant violence perpetuated by its new leadership, it has squandered the grassroots support it enjoyed prior to 2009. It has, at least temporarily, lost the backing of even the most fundamentalist segments of Nigeria’s Muslim population, who ironically still largely share the group’s rejectionist, anti-state sentiments. Importantly, Boko Haram has also seemingly failed to garner substantial external support (moral, political, technical, financial, or military) from other jihadi groups or from a foreign government.

## Future Trajectory of the Conflict

In order to develop effective assistance programs, it is crucial that planners and decision-makers not only understand the current state of the conflict but also have a sense of how the conflict is evolving. In this section we describe several future scenarios and identify potential “trigger events” which could serve to accelerate violence.

### How modern insurgencies resolve

Insurgencies have a defined shelf life and are resolved in a limited number of ways. They succeed, fail, or degenerate into terrorism or criminality. Unlike the anti-colonial insurgencies around the world following World War II, most contemporary insurgencies do not end with the outright destruction of the insurgent organization or the full defeat of the government. Instead, modern insurgencies have often degenerated into criminal organizations with financial motivations or into terrorist groups capable of little more than sporadic violence. In a few cases, the counterinsurgent government has resolved the conflict by co-opting the insurgents.<sup>291</sup>

A review of the historical literature on how modern insurgencies end reveals a number of factors which help predict the likely course of the conflict. When insurgents have achieved decisive victories, it has been because the government they opposed has enjoyed little support from its own people (often due to a lack of legitimacy, caused by a lack of political inclusion and or heavy-handed COIN tactics). Also, on average, insurgencies have been more successful if they have received external support and if they have a safe haven across a friendly border.

Governments have achieved clear-cut victories over insurgents only under very favorable circumstances. When they have done so, it has been in geographically isolated areas with no sanctuaries for the insurgents. Moreover, threatened governments have had a higher chance of success if they have addressed the root causes of conflict and the grievances on which the insurgency was feeding, have prevented the insurgents from receiving external support, and have themselves received the support of an outside power.

Case studies of modern insurgencies indicate that the longer a conflict goes on, the more likely it is that the insurgent group will degenerate into a terrorist organization or transform itself into a criminal enterprise with or without the cover of a legitimate

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<sup>291</sup> For more on this see: Thomas R. Mockaitis, “Resolving Insurgencies,” Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, June 2011.

revolution.<sup>292</sup> In most cases, this degeneration has occurred when the government has won the military struggle but fails to secure the peace by reintegrating remnants of the disaffected insurgent group into legitimate society and politics.

## Contemporary African insurgencies

The literature on internal violent conflict in Africa suggests that these types of conflicts have evolved in the post-Cold War period. The classic African liberation movements of the post-colonial era, which fought against colonialism, tyranny, or apartheid, have, in many cases, transformed into something more diffuse, intractable, and long lasting. According to one study on internal conflict and the African state, these new wars, “characterized by a blurring of the lines between war, organized crime, and large scale-human rights violations...demonstrate new modalities which distinguish them from more conventional civil wars.”<sup>293</sup>

In today’s contemporary African conflict, traditional political objectives, such as regime overthrow or succession, often overlap or evolve into ethno-nationalist or economic motivations.<sup>294</sup> For example, internal conflicts in the Niger Delta and the Democratic Republic of Congo involved rebel movements that, while they may have spawned from legitimate grievances (such as ethnic tensions, disputes over land, and refugees), eventually devolved into opportunistic and heavily armed banditry.<sup>295</sup>

Rebel groups such as the Lord’s Resistance Army have little in the way of ideology and little interest in controlling territory.<sup>296</sup> Without a significant support base or sympathetic population, they often resort to forced recruitment of child soldiers. Without clear political objectives, they are more interested in amassing wealth and weapons. The lack of legitimate demands or political objectives renders negotiations with these groups futile.<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> Mockaitis, “Resolving Insurgencies,” 2011.

<sup>293</sup> Richard Jackson. “Violent Internal Conflict and the African State: Towards a Framework of Analysis.” *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 20:1 (2002): 29-52.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

<sup>295</sup> Jeffery Gettleman. “Africa’s Forever Wars: Why the Continent’s Conflicts Never End.” *Foreign Policy*, online, 22 February 2010, accessed 10 September 2014 at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/02/22/africas\\_forever\\_wars](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/02/22/africas_forever_wars).

<sup>296</sup> The LRA began as a rebel movement in northern Uganda in the 1980s which was opposed to the extreme poverty and marginalization of the country’s ethnic Acholi population. The movement quickly turned into a roving criminal band which turned on the very Acholi people it was supposed to be protecting.

<sup>297</sup> Gettleman, “Africa’s Forever Wars: Why the Continent’s Conflicts Never End,” 2010.

## Boko Haram conflict trends and potential accelerants & decelerants of violence

A review of recent events in northeast Nigeria reveals several trends which could affect the trajectory of the Boko Haram conflict in the coming months.

- **Increased violence:** In the last several months Boko Haram has increased the number of its attacks and has managed to conduct strikes in areas outside of its stronghold in the northeast, including in areas beyond Nigerian borders. Moreover, it has managed to route Nigerian security forces in a number of more conventional skirmishes. Many analysts predict that Boko Haram will attempt to disrupt the upcoming 2015 presidential elections, and speculate that violence will spike in the run up to election (and possibly afterwards, depending on the outcome).
- **Apparent shift in Boko Haram's strategy:** At the time of this writing it appears that Boko Haram is attempting to hold territory in a way that it has not been able to do until now. In recent months it has captured numerous villages and towns, and in some cases has prevented Nigerian forces from retaking them. There is some debate as to whether Boko Haram has officially declared the creation of an Islamic caliphate in the areas it has overrun. In recent weeks it has attempted to establish order in the towns it has captured by imposing sharia law. Regardless, there is little indication that the group has developed the kind of political/governance structure to administer territory that it had before Mohammed Yusuf's death in 2009.
- **Decrease in military's morale:** The Nigerian military has struggled to respond to the threat posed by Boko Haram. Nigerian troops are not adequately resourced or equipped to counter the insurgency. Their equipment is insufficient, and much of what they do have has fallen into disrepair. According to a U.S. Department of Defense assessment, Nigerian troops are "showing signs of real fear," and becoming "afraid to even engage."
- **Increase in Boko Haram's forced recruitment:** Unable to garner broader public support for its cause, Boko Haram appears to be increasingly dependent on forced recruitment, including that of children.
- **Increase in self-help groups:** With the government unable to secure the population in the northeast, in the last year there has been a proliferation of self-defense groups in the northeast. The most notable such group is the CJTF, which has agreed to partner with Nigerian security forces.
- **Decreased public confidence in government:** In recent months, the inability of the military to beat back Boko Haram, the increasing number of bombings in the

south, and the high-profile kidnappings have eroded support for President Jonathan's administration (even among his traditional southern support base) and has begun to raise doubts about the central government's ability to keep Nigeria's diverse ethnic and religious factions unified.

- **Increased international attention/pressure on the Nigerian government:** The Boko Haram's April 2014 abduction of 300 schoolgirls, other high-profile kidnappings, and an increase in Boko Haram's operational sophistication has intensified international attention on the group. Alongside other members of the international community, the U.S. government has sent teams of advisors to work with the Nigerian government.
- **Increased cooperation on the part of Nigeria's neighbors.** In recent months, Boko Haram has increased its attacks across the border in Cameroon. In addition, the humanitarian crisis in the north of Nigeria has resulted in thousands of refugees fleeing into neighboring Chad and Niger. The government of these three countries, as a result, have pledged to work together cooperatively to counter the threat from Boko Haram. Through the existing Lake Chad Basin Commission, in October 2014, member countries pledged to stand up a multinational joint task force in early November 2014 to counter Boko Haram.
- **Apparent shift in government strategy:** In recent months some officials in the Nigerian government have hinted that a comprehensive and population-centric strategy will be necessary in order to defeat Boko Haram and, in general, to reduce support for anti-government groups in the northeast. In March 2014, the National Security Adviser announced a new "soft" approach to deal with the root causes of terrorism in Nigeria, though little action has been taken thus far.

## Possible conflict trajectories

An examination of current conflict trends as well as analysis on how contemporary insurgencies and modern African internal conflicts end, suggests several plausible scenarios for the evolution of the Boko Haram conflict. Here we present four possible futures, starting from most likely to the least likely. In preparing these scenarios, we assumed that the Nigerian government's current, predominantly kinetic, approach to combating Boko Haram will remain, for the most part, unchanged in the near term.

## Devolution to criminality or terrorism

According to the writings of Mao Tse-Tung, guerilla warfare without a political front and strong links to the population is nothing but “roving banditry.”<sup>298</sup> Because Boko Haram enjoys so little grassroots or external support, because it has so far failed to provide an ideological catalyst to mobilize discontent and focus it on an achievable objective, and because it has to date failed to develop a mechanism to administer territory, it is probable that over time the group could devolve into a criminal or terrorist organization without territory or a home base.

Other factors that support this scenario include the fact that the insurgency is heavily outmatched by a strong Nigerian government which, on multiple occasions, has shown the capacity to decimate the group and which enjoys strong international support—including support from its neighbors, who wish to close their borders and eradicate Boko Haram sanctuaries in their territories. After the insurgency has been severely weakened, it is also likely that the Nigerian government will fail to reconcile with surviving hardcore militants, opening up the possibility that they continue as a criminal or terrorist group.

## Expansion and secession

Because of its extreme tactics, in its current form Boko Haram enjoys little to no public support. It has not been able to mobilize large segments of the population and instead recruits support from a single ethnic group and from young, unemployed men who are mainly interested in financial rewards. Nevertheless, the conditions in northeastern Nigeria are ripe for an expansion of the conflagration. The Muslim population’s frustration with the government overall, the continued poverty and economic disparity, and the disillusionment with mainstream Islamic leaders has created an environment in which radical, fundamentalist movements are among the only groups left with some credibility.<sup>299</sup> If Boko Haram experiences a change in leadership or reforms its violent tactics, and if the government and northern elites fail to address root causes and grievances in the northeast, it is possible that the insurgency could attain significant grassroots support, as it did prior to 2009. If this occurs, the conflict could spread outside of the northeast to the whole of Muslim-dominated Nigeria, thereby deepening religious and regional fault lines, and threatening national unity and stability. If the Muslim majority in the north were

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<sup>298</sup> David Galula. “Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice.” Praeger Security International, Westport, Connecticut, 1964.

<sup>299</sup> Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, USAID. *Nigeria Conflict Assessment Desk Study*. May 2010.

mobilized in support of Boko Haram's objectives, it is possible that the north could attempt to break away in a secessionist bid to create an Islamic state.

## Fracture and co-option

Because Boko Haram has little chance of achieving any sort of military victory in the short to mid-term without additional internal or external support, and because the group itself is already reportedly highly fragmented and its leadership is highly divisive, it is possible that over time Boko Haram could fraction and some groups could become susceptible to co-option by the state. Already factions within the insurgency have attempted to enter into negotiations with the Nigerian government. If the conflict evolves into a strategic stalemate, it might be possible to persuade belligerents that they have nothing to gain from continued fighting. If the insurgency were to fracture, it is likely that hardcore elements of Boko Haram either would devolve into a criminal or terrorist organization or would be decisively defeated by Nigerian security forces.

## Civil war

A more ominous outcome could be the "Somaliaization" of the Nigerian state. Nigeria suffers from a number of "centrifugal forces," such as ethno-religious conflict, power politics, and economic disparities, which constantly pull the country apart. These forces are kept in check by a number of formal and informal mitigating institutions such as civil society dispute-resolution mechanisms and processes such as the zone power-sharing agreement. If Boko Haram can successfully accelerate these forces by creating an Islamic caliphate in the northeast and by conducting spectacular terrorist attacks in the volatile Middle Belt, while at the same time degrading the government's ability to contain them by reducing its perceived legitimacy, it is possible that the state could collapse from within. Such turmoil could theoretically produce an environment in which Boko Haram could more easily recruit members from across the Muslim north and which could eventually lead to civil war.

## Conclusion

Regardless of which trajectory the conflict takes, for the short to mid-term, Boko Haram will continue to present a significant threat to stability in Nigeria. Indeed, in recent months, Boko Haram has grown increasingly active and brazen in its attacks, and is for the first time attempting to hold territory. The Muslim population remains frustrated with the government and with continued poverty and economic disparity in the north. If the Nigerian government is unable to deal with underlying grievances and reverse current dynamics, conditions on the ground in the northeast are ripe for potential expansion of the conflict, whether it is led by Boko Haram, its splinter factions, or other extremist groups.

Based on the analysis presented in this report, **we conclude that the conflict in the northeast is most accurately viewed as a counterinsurgency problem rather than a pure counterterrorism problem.** Boko Haram is a regional insurgent group with local and national political objectives—though it lacks a political front. Instead, it uses subversion, guerilla tactics, and terrorism to carve out living space for itself and to further its aims of eventually overthrowing the Nigerian government. Its emergence and sustainment have been driven by a number of underlying contextual factors and proximate causes, including decades of poor governance, elite delinquency, and extreme economic inequality. Table 1 lists these factors and their causes.

Table 1. Contextual and proximate causes of internal conflict in northern Nigeria

| Contextual factors                                 | Proximate causes                         |
|----------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Ethno-religious cleavages                          | Systemic corruption and poor governance  |
| Politics and power-sharing                         | Unequal resource distribution            |
| Economic transformation                            | Unemployment                             |
| Historical fundamentalist, rejectionist tendencies | Deterioration of power-sharing agreement |
| Historical secessionist tendencies                 | Sectarian strife                         |
|                                                    | Government's heavy-handed tactics        |

It is becoming increasingly clear that Boko Haram and other violent, fundamentalist extremist groups which may emanate from the northeast will not be defeated by military force alone. Despite its decapitation in 2009 and considerable losses in recent years at the hands of state security forces, the group has managed to regenerate and come back even stronger. Moreover, the Nigerian government's use of military force in the north has further alienated the population, which in turn has reduced the amount of intelligence it can obtain—intelligence it needs to operate

effectively against Boko Haram and to protect its forces in the field. *In a very real way, the conflict is now being driven by the weaknesses of the national government and northern elites and institutions rather than by Boko Haram's strengths.*

The results of this conflict assessment suggest that **a new, more comprehensive approach by the Nigerian government—one that seeks to address political, economic, and social grievances—will be needed to degrade and eventually defeat the threat posed by Boko Haram.** Such an approach would also work to stamp out the current extremist rejectionist thinking which periodically generates these violent extremist organizations in the northeast of the country. For the United States and the rest of the international community, this will mean working with the government of Nigeria on a variety of assistance fronts, including political, developmental, economic, and military.

Partnering with the Nigerian government has been (and most likely will continue to be) a challenge for the United States. Due to a range of complex political, social, and economic reasons, the government of Nigeria has not taken an effective approach to the Boko Haram conflict. If the U.S. and its international partners continue to participate in efforts to end this conflict, they must focus on identifying areas for cooperation and coordination with Nigeria—and its neighbors, which are increasingly being touched and threatened by Boko Haram. In a subsequent report, we will present specific options for the U.S. government to do so.

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